

# **Secondary school teachers' experiences of learning support**

by

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# DECLARATION

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**Signature:** Julia Hannah

**Date:** 23 February 2015

# DEDICATION

*To my Mother*

*Your values and eagerness to undertake and complete  
your ventures taught me the perseverance I have.*

*You taught me to be honest to myself,  
always do my best and complete what I start.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most importantly, I want to thank my husband for believing in me. For all your love and support. You stood by me from the beginning. I love you for being there for me.

My three lovely daughters, you are my support, you are the best always.

To my honest and dear friends, for your supportive words and for lending a willing ear.

To Professor Estelle Swart for your guidance and patience, I am grateful.

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# ABSTRACT

Secondary school teachers are faced daily with many challenges when supporting learners with diverse needs. These challenges can influence their ability to perform their role of supporting such learners in the classroom. Even though learning support in the secondary school is a complex multi-level phenomenon, teachers are expected to ensure that all the learners reach their full potential. The aim of this study was to explore and describe secondary school teachers' experiences of supporting learners with diverse needs in challenging circumstances. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model framed the research enquiry. Proximal processes and their related concepts were used as tools to explore and describe the teachers' approach to learning support in a secondary school. Since this study was an exploration of a phenomenon qualitative research methods were applied. The research methods added rich information using various techniques. These included an activity in which the teachers reflected on their experiences, individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, research questions and narrative discussions with participants. The data collected was analysed using the method of constant comparison. Findings from the analysed data revealed the teachers' concerns and the challenges they faced in their classrooms while supporting their learners. Although they described these challenges and adverse circumstances as barriers, they nevertheless appeared as caring, confident professionals who had both the potential and the desire to advance their own development and to carry out effective learning support.

Against this background, the teachers' own needs, whether emotional, social, cognitive or developmental, were vital to their ability to support effective learning in the classroom.

## OPSOMMING

Hoërskool onderwysers is daagliks betrokke by leerders met diverse behoeftes en die uitdagings wat daarmee gepaard gaan. Hierdie uitdagings het 'n daadwerklike uitwerking op 'n onderwyser se talle rolle tydens ondersteuning van leer by leerders. Alhoewel leerondersteuning in die hoërskool as kompleks, ongewoon en met verskeie fasette ervaar word, word daar van onderwysers verwag om alle leerders te ondersteun. Die doel met hierdie studie was om onderwysers se ervarings van leerondersteuning van die diverse leerbehoefte in uitdagende kontekste te ondersoek. Hierdie ervaring sluit in hoe ervare onderwysers in uitdagende omstandighede kinders ondersteun in die klaskamer. Bronfenbrenner se bio-ekologiese teorie verleen die raamwerk vir die studie. Gevolglik is verwante proksimale prosesse en konsepte gebruik sodat onderwysers se ervarings van leerondersteuning verstaan kan word. Aangesien hierdie studie 'n verkennende ondersoek was, is kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetodes gebruik. Die navorsingsmetodes het verseker dat waardevolle inligting ingewin word deur die gebruik van tegnieke soos: 'n refleksie-aktiwiteit, individuele onderhoude, 'n fokusgroeponderhoud, 'n oopvraelys en narratiewe bespreking van deelnemers. Die konstante vergelykende metode is gebruik om die data te ontleed. Bevindinge van die geanaliseerde data het die onderwysers se bekommernisse en uitdagings, rakende hul ervarings tydens ondersteuning, aan die lig gebring. Alhoewel die onderwysers hul uitdagings en moeilike omstandighede as hindernisse tydens ondersteuning van leer ervaar, gee hulle om, voel selfversekerd en tree professioneel op. Hulle toon die potensiaal en hunkering na eie ontwikkeling, ten einde effektiewe leerondersteuning te kan bied.

Dit is teen hierdie agtergrond duidelik dat onderwysers die belangrikste ondersteuners in die klaskamer is. Daarom is die onderwysers se emosionele, sosiale, kognitiewe en self-ontwikkeling van die uiterste belang vir leerders se effektiewe leerervarings.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **CONTEXTUALIZATION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

#### **1.1 INTRODUCTION:**

Teachers' own interpretation and understanding of learning support have long been close to my heart. I felt there was a need to explore this topic, specifically in the secondary school setting. This was evident from a pilot study I carried out while completing an Honours degree in Support in Community and a practicum for counselling. I agree with the Department of Education that "all children require care and support in order to thrive and learn" (DoE, 2001b). While I was working as a student counsellor in a mainstream secondary school in Stellenbosch, the teachers brought to my attention a number of daily challenges in their classrooms. These were mainly in the subject areas of maths, literacy, and language, but also involved problems of behaviour and emotional development, daily workload problems, and absenteeism from school, all of which had a significant impact on learning. Even though they recognized the need to give support, the teachers admitted that they were not familiar with their learners' backgrounds and environmental dynamics, which were added concerns. Barriers to learning and problems with participation in the classroom arose from a variety of factors. Their experiences resonated with the factors identified by socio-economic deprivation, an inflexible curriculum, and negative attitudes to and stereotyping of differences, inaccessible and unsafe buildings, inappropriate language of learning and teaching, inappropriate and inadequate support services, non-recognition and non-involvement of parents, inadequate policies and legislation, and inadequately and inappropriately trained leaders and teachers (DoE, 2001b).

In secondary schools, the classroom context is complex, and the challenges are interactive and on various levels. Adolescents are at a stage of their development where they need guidance, support and interaction from confident, enthusiastic teachers (Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx & Zamboanga, 2013). Adolescent learners present a challenge to secondary school teachers, both in their roles, learning and teaching styles, and more specifically in the approach they take to support in the classroom (Lorenz, 2002; Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy, & Wearmouth 2009; Roos, 2010). Additionally, communal factors, including

disintegration of families, poverty, declining moral and value systems, child abuse, addiction and violence in the community, can all have a negative impact on daily learning.

I believe this study is particularly relevant, given the current difficulties some South African schools seem to have with adopting inclusive policies and practices. At the same time, there is a relative lack of research documenting teachers' experiences of implementing learning support in secondary school classrooms. However, while change and the transition to learning support in South African schools have been slow and challenging, one should not make the mistake of assuming that the teachers are unsuccessful or are not trying their best (Bouwer, 2011). The evidence suggests that they do their utmost to create a safe and effective learning environment, even though they may feel personally ill equipped or weighed down by their learners' learning, behavioural and emotional needs (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001).

Learning support is based on a mind-set or a philosophy which teachers can often find difficult to translate into the practice of support in the classroom. Learning support in this context refers to teachers' experiences of learners with diverse needs in the classroom context (More detailed conceptual analysis is available in section 2.6 Teachers' feelings towards supporting learners). This could be due to the challenges involved with supporting learners of different class, race, gender, abilities, or language, and with the level of their achievement in diverse classrooms (Fisher, 2007). Teachers tend to interpret their approach to learning support in a certain way, constructing their own worlds and giving meaning to these experiences. They try to make sense and create their own ways of carrying out such support in the classroom (Merriam, 2009, p.23). Since "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Merriam, 2009, p.23), I was interested not only in what the teachers thought but also in "how" they thought as they did and "why" (Kitzinger, 1994, p.104). In this study, I looked for the "way" in which the participants made meaning of their understanding and interpretation of learning support. In other words, I was concerned not just "that" they made meaning but, as importantly, "what" or how that meaning was understood (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.53).

Thus secondary school teachers' interpretation of learning support plays a central role in the way they identify and assess their learners and the way in which they respond to each learner's individual needs (Swart & Pettipher, 2011; Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2012). Accommodating such diverse needs is a prerequisite for effective learning in the classroom, despite there being no specific "recipe" for such support (Le Roux & Perold, 2012, p.1). Indeed, in an inclusive education system it could be argued not only that "support is part of all teaching and all staff is involved in it" (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, p.6) but that it is the "cornerstone of successful inclusive education" (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.20). In this view, teachers are the primary source of the care and support learners need to reach their full potential (McLeod & McKinnon, 2010; Africa, 2010). However, contextualizing learning support is not straightforward, a point which will be discussed in more detail in chapter two. In essence, teachers are themselves a fundamental source of personal strengths, knowledge, skills, and rich social relationships with the environment and the [learning support] process, which takes place in the context of these relationships (Bouwer, 2011).

To understand secondary school teachers' experiences of learning support in a general classroom, it will be necessary first to give a brief background of the history and process leading to the concept of learning support. Before 1994, general education in South Africa fell under the system of apartheid, involving segregation and discrimination. According to Lomofsky and Lazarus (2001), teachers' roles and practices in this period were characterized by "segregation" and "exclusion", and were ingrained in the medical model of support (p.304). On the basis of this, learners with learning disabilities were singled out, diagnosed, tested in a specific environment by specialists, and labelled. Similarly, the training of teachers was divided between those who aimed to focus on learners with "special needs" in special classes and schools, and those who would teach learners with "ordinary" needs in regular classes. The beginning of a democratic South Africa signalled the end of politics of exclusion in education and the start of politics of inclusion (D'Amant, 2012). With the introduction of democratic principles and theories of social justice and freedom from discrimination, change was inevitable. This was reflected in the replacement of the "medical model" by the thinking and policy directives of a social ecological model (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.17). With the introduction of inclusion, traditional teaching practices in classrooms needed to reflect the fundamental transformations and adaptations envisioned for the

teachers as mediators of learning in diverse contexts (Swart & Pettipher, 2011; Nel, et al., 2012).

The following policy documents are significant:

- NCSNET and NCESS (DoE, 1997)
- Norms and Standards for Teachers (DoE, 2000)
- White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001b)
- The White Paper on Education and Training in Democratic South Africa (DoE, 1995)
- The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996
- The White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) (DoE, 1997) and subsequent National Disability Framework (DoE, 2011)
- The National Commission on Special Educational Needs and Training and The National Committee on Educational Support Services (DoE, 1997)
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006), ratified by South Africa in 2007
- Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom (DoE, 2011)
- Guidelines for Full-Service and Inclusive Schools (DoE, 2010)
- The National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (DoE, 2008)
- Draft Guidelines for Inclusive Learning Programmes (ILP) (DoE, 2005).

Although inclusive education may reflect the principles of “appropriate support” in the “classroom context” (Nel et al., 2012, p.40), the realities of regular education continued to pose a number of challenges for teachers (Magare, Kitching & Roos, 2010). The discussion of inclusion in White Paper 6 acknowledged the failure of the education system to respond to the needs of all learners and to answer to a broad range of learning needs. Loebenstein (2005, as cited in Engelbrecht, 2006) noted that “if not effectively addressed, [it] could contribute to continued failure to learn” (p. 255). Although inclusion increased with the change in paradigm, there seems a paucity of research regarding teachers’ experiences of learning support in South African context. However, the teachers’ responses became more complex, often with poor results according to other countries (Ellins, 2005, p.188). Secondary school teachers who had hitherto operated within a “medical model” found it



difficult to adapt to supporting learners in the new classroom context (Carrington & Robinson, 2006, p.331).

The key question is how do secondary school teachers support learners' diverse needs and build on their strengths in the classroom, instead of "remediating" or "rectifying" deficits or "shortcomings" outside the classroom?(Bouwer, 2011, p.53). While most teachers support inclusion in theory, in practice they often seem to see the change towards inclusion as a radical interruption of their old and accustomed values, attitudes, norms and practices (D'Amant, 2012).

Educational systems constantly evolve to keep pace with the ever-changing needs of societies. In South Africa, the introduction of democracy, new policies and non-racialism in 1994 brought with it new demands for secondary school teachers to adapt toward social change. Increasingly classrooms became more diverse and including greater numbers of learners with a range of disabilities and learning difficulties (Forlin, 2001). Although it had not been the role of secondary school teachers traditionally to provide such learning support in their classrooms, the demand to meet the "special needs" and treat all learners on an equal basis rapidly increased (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001, pp. 304, 305). According to the Progress Report to the minister of education, ministerial committee on learner retention in the South African schooling system given to the Minister of Education (Pandor, October 2007), repetition of grades was the root of many learners' academic and behavioural problems in South African schools. Ideally, early intervention and support should start in the foundation phase. However, in the interim, learners in the Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) phases experienced "breakdown in learning", school dropout and barriers to learning, with very little support being received from their teachers (Nel, et al., 2012, p. 14). Even though the teachers had a moral obligation and a caring attitude, they nevertheless felt that learners with barriers were being dumped on them and that they were being held responsible for their support (Keegan, 2004). Much has been written about teachers' responses to inclusive education (Keegan, 2004). Much less is known, however, about the problems they face in supporting learners with diverse needs in the secondary school.

## 1.2 MOTIVATION AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study was motivated by a concern for teachers who struggle to support learners in the classroom. Its purpose is to explore and describe how secondary school teachers deal with the challenge of supporting all their learners. There is an urgent need to gain a clear understanding of what it takes to support such learners. This kind of knowledge should be included in the education of the teachers themselves, to prepare both current and future teachers for an inclusive education system and for in-service training and support (Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel & Malinen, 2012). I hoped to identify and learn about their competencies, beliefs, ideas, attitudes and their resilience to the stresses in their classrooms. The study is not about saturated stories on what they do not have or cannot do, but rather is concerned with their abilities and their capacity to carry out learning support in the face of adversity. My hope is that the knowledge gained from studying their subjective experiences could be added to the extant body of knowledge (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff & Pettipher, 2002; Monsen & Fredrickson, 2004).

According to reports from Dale-Jones (<http://mg.co.za/printformat/single/2012-04-05-networks-bring/results-for-teachers>), learners “lack the support”. This is reflected in an increasing concern over the quality and pass rate of matric learners in South African schools. In the same vein, Angie Motshekga, Minister of the Department of Basic Education, noted that those repeaters and learners who wanted to return to school should receive support (John, Aug, 2012). While the Department of Basic Education has made a significant investment in education and learning, secondary school learners’ academic results nevertheless remain poor, school dropout rates are high, and barriers to equal and quality education persist (Giese, 2010).

According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006, p.1302, as cited in Gu & Day, 2011), teaching is an especially demanding job in an emerging “age of diversity and sustainability”. From my personal experience, I know that teachers find the work challenging and are desperate to find ways to support the diverse needs of all their learners. During my interaction and encounters in schools, they sought confirmation of their abilities and conveyed their concerns about children with learning problems, emotional health and wellbeing issues. This echoes research findings which show that teachers themselves do not feel adequately

prepared and trained to support and take on extra responsibilities (Kidger, Gunnel, Biddle, Campbell & Donovan, 2013). A considerable volume of data has been collected on the attitudes of teachers to inclusive education, their different interpretations and the roles they play in implementing such education (Smit & Mpya, 2011). Their beliefs, attitudes and understanding are often influenced by interaction with the systems of the environments in which they work (Swart et al., 2002). Research further indicates a need for insight into the teachers' own values, strengths, resilience and abilities, as these relate to their subjective experiences of learning support (Swart et al., 2002; Monsen & Fredrickson, 2004).

Today's teachers are expected to embrace diversity and create appropriate and suitable ways to support all learners with diverse needs (Barnes, 2011). Since the implementation of inclusive education, however, "the work and lives of such teachers have been neglected in the research literature" (Gu & Day 2011, p. 1303), and the question of the teachers' own learning support experiences remains an overlooked area.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION**

The research question that guided this study was:

How do secondary school teachers experience learning support in the classroom context?

The research sub-questions were:

- 1) What does learning support involve for secondary school teachers?
- 2) How do teachers support learners with diverse needs in secondary schools?
- 3) What do they perceive they need to support learners with diverse needs in the classroom? As part of this question, I hope to find out (from the participants) what factors helped them to support learners and contributed to their own learning support experiences.

### **1.4 RESEARCH AIM**

The aim of the study was to explore and describe teachers' experiences of learning support in secondary school classrooms. In other words, as Merriam (2009) puts it, "The experience a teacher has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted" (p.9).

The focus will briefly shift to a description of the design and structure of the study and the methodology that was followed in addressing the above research questions.

## 1.5 THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), a research design involves the planning of a scientific inquiry. In the first instance, it specifies what needs to be investigated and, secondly, determines the best way to go about this. For this study, I chose a basic qualitative approach, since this was most appropriate for guiding the selection of methods, design and methodology, for exploring teachers' multiple realities and discovering how they interpreted their experiences of learning support (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). The research design is discussed in greater depth in chapter three. This section merely provides a summarized introduction to contextualize the study at this point. Refer to Fig 1.1 for a schematic representation of the research design with the paradigm of the study, purpose for the research and the context where the data gathering was completed. The techniques include the methods used to gather data from the participants where after the analysis of data is noted.

Throughout I have adhered to all the principles of qualitative research (discussed in 3.3), with the focus on teachers' experiences. Multiple methods were used to ensure an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon in question. The methods were chosen to complement the study in a coherent manner (Henning et al., 2004). A combination of data collection methods was used, with a focus group interview, individual semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, narrative reflective notes, and a drawing activity named, 'mapping a diverse classroom'. The constant comparative method of analysis was used, which involves a process of comparing data from various participants (Merriam, 2009).

My selection of the participants was purposive, that is, non-probabilistic in nature (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). The process of selection or sampling involves identifying appropriate participants from a particular population. For this study, it meant taking decisions about which teachers would be representative of their working context (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Purposeful sampling is commonly used with information-rich sources, allowing for a detailed, rich description and analysis of data (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Before beginning the sampling, I first had to determine the criteria. In this study, the unit of analysis consisted of secondary school teachers who were willing to share their

classroom support experiences. In particular, no specific rules were to be applied relating to the teachers' gender. Based on my knowledge of the unit of analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), the chosen participants could "yield most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" and could provide rich and useful knowledge to other teachers in similar situations (Patton, 2002, p.236). Most importantly, they were teachers with experiences, beliefs, values, perceptions, interpretations and understanding of learning support in their natural environment (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). This was especially important, as the methodology for this study called for a sample that would generate knowledge in the form of a rich and detailed description (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

### 1.5 Table of data collection process of participants

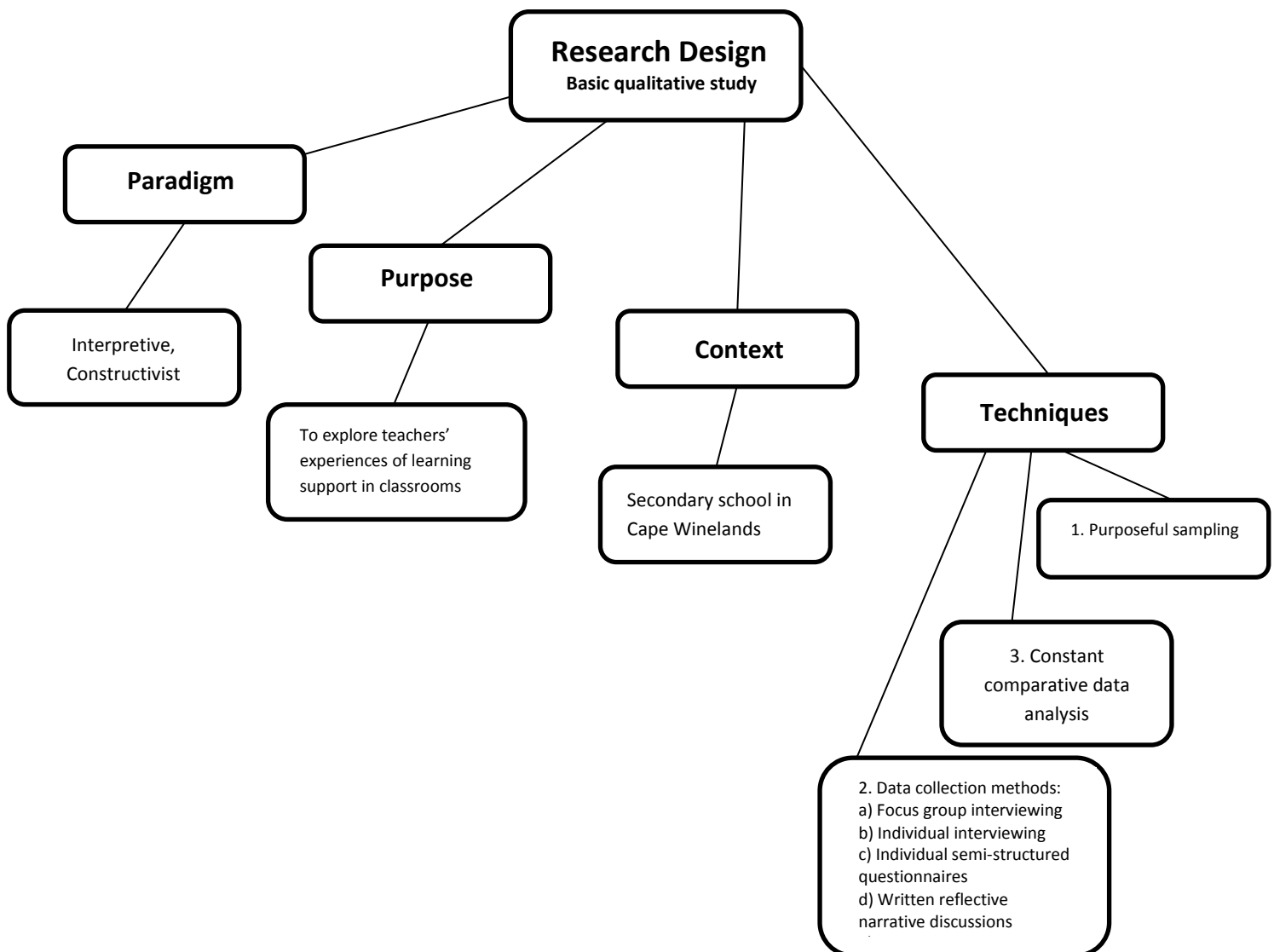
METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION	TYPE OF DATA	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Focus group interviews	Verbal, auditory	5
individual semi-structured interviews	Verbal, auditory, written	2
written reflective notes	Written	2
Individual questionnaires	Written	11
Activity – Mapping a diverse classroom	Pictorial, drawing, verbal	3 (From the 20 participants)
Total number of participating teachers		20

The sample consisted of twenty teachers willing to take part in the research (Refer to the above table 1.5) for a representation of participants during data collection process. I employed a multiple method of collecting data to enhance the validity of the findings (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). It involves using more than one approach to studying a single problem, looking for evidence linking aspects of the phenomenon (Kelly, 2006). The data collection took place during the mid-year exams in 2013. Twenty teachers took part in the data collection and felt this was the most appropriate time for them to take part in the research. The data collection process as it was implemented is discussed below:

- Out of the twenty teachers involved in the data collection process, five teachers were part of the focus group interviews. The focus group interviews took place for ninety minutes in a room which was quiet and comfortable. This technique of data

collection helps to create meaning among the participants in a short time, with insights which they might never have thought of before (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). An interview guide with flexible open-ended questions was used during the focus group interview to collect more or less similar information from the participants (Patton, 2002).

- Two teachers took part in individual semi-structured interviews using a flexible open-ended questions interview guide. With this, the participants could talk freely about their experiences of implementing learning support in the classroom. Both teachers were interviewed separately for forty five minutes each, on the same day at school in a quiet and comfortable room.
- Two teachers wrote reflective narrative discussions, giving voice to their thoughts, interpretations and experiences of learning support. Again, an interview guide with flexible open-ended questions was used to stimulate thought within each participant. The teachers completed the narrative discussions in their own time. The discussions were collected from the teachers in the following week.
- An activity that was deemed valuable during the data collection process was presented to all twenty participants during a meeting in the staffroom. I explained to the teachers that the activity was voluntary. Three of the twenty teachers voluntarily described their experiences of learning support using the activity 'mapping a diverse classroom'. This activity was used as a way of exploring the participants' experiences of learning support in the classroom during an individual interview (Rohleder, Swartz, Carolissen, Bozalek & Leibowitz, 2008). The activity named 'mapping a diverse classroom' was used to elicit information-rich responses from the teachers. It required the participants to draw, write and reflect. This added to a variety of research methods which was agreed upon between the researcher and participants (Walden, 2012). According to Horan (1999, p.188, as cited in Van Ommen & Painter, 2005), this activity "defines a sketch map as 'a map drawn from memory of a place a person has been'" (p.506).
- Eleven of the twenty teachers involved with the data collection process, took part in the individual written questionnaires. The eleven teachers took the questionnaires with them to complete in their own time.



**Figure 1.1 Schematic presentation of the research design** (Adapted from Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006)

Once the data had been collected, the recordings of the interviews ensured authenticity and assisted with understanding the transcriptions of the teachers' lived experiences. As the researcher, I was the "primary instrument" in the process of creating a significant context within which to collect and analyse the data (Terre Blanche, Kelly & Durrheim 2006, p.276). I was aware of my responsibility to remain unbiased (Babbie & Mouton 2001). It is also important to note that, as the researcher, I was as much a product of my society as were those taking part in the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). My own background, feelings and beliefs were factors in the process of knowledge construction. To ensure credibility, I

therefore had to stay close to the context and respect and appreciate the teachers' responses as being a truthful reflection of their experiences. It was also necessary to distance my personal insights, values and beliefs, so that the phenomenon under study could be seen clearly from a new perspective (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). This process and the role of the researcher will be discussed in more detail in section 3.4.2. In addition, I used constant comparative analysis for the study and a detailed discussion of this is given in section 3.6.

Ethics are an important aspect of the research process, particularly when, as in this case, it involves individuals with their own meanings, beliefs, understandings and opinions. It was therefore necessary to ensure the teachers' consent, privacy, autonomy and confidentiality. Offered these assurances, the participants would be more willing to be honest and speak freely (Lambert, 2012). As noted by Tindal (1996), it is important that participants share their personal experiences and insights.

The prospective participants were told about the aims and purpose of the research, enabling them to make an informed decision about whether or not to take part in the process. They were further informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any point. I promised to brief them on the outcomes at the conclusion of the study. They were also told they could obtain copies of the interviews after the study had been completed if they wished to clear up any uncertainties.

To ensure that all ethical considerations were addressed, I sought ethical clearance for the study from the Research Ethical Committee (Humanities) in the Department of Research Development at Stellenbosch University. I further applied and obtained permission from the Western Cape Education Department to conduct research in the particular school chosen (Addendum A), after which the school was contacted and permission obtained from the principal.



## **1.6 STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION**

What follows is a summary of the manner in which this thesis was structured:

Chapter one gives the background and context of the study. It briefly discusses the aims, motivation and methodology of the study.

Chapter two places the study in its theoretical framework and provides an in-depth exploration of the literature relevant to a qualitative study.

Chapter three presents a detailed discussion of the research process, including aspects such as the methodology, research design and paradigm, as well as the ethical considerations that were addressed in the study.

Chapter four presents the research findings. A discussion and interpretation of these findings are included. Lastly, chapter five offers an interpretation of the findings and a description of their limitations.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 LEARNING SUPPORT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

The teaching profession is complex. It requires specific qualities and beliefs in order to carry out successful and effective learning support (Husu & Tirri, 2007). Most teachers pursue the inclusive and equity-minded goal of support for all learners. Nevertheless, they struggle with seemingly inflexible pressures and problems as they work to implement the necessary changes (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009, p.436). The bottom line is that the quality of an education system is limited by the quality of its teachers and their understanding of diverse needs in an inclusive classroom system (Schleicher, 2011, p.204). This study therefore specifically aimed to explore teachers' own understandings, since they are the prime source of information.

There is an increasing recognition in research of the need for educational change, and especially in teachers' understanding of the complex process of giving effective support in classrooms for those learners with diverse needs (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). Little is known about how teachers actually implement their skills and practices at the frontline during their daily work with learners. This is a relatively new area of research, but one which warrants exploration. Understanding learning support is complex and a core tenet of this research, therefore will involve familiarizing the reader with the concepts significant to building the most appropriate theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework underpinning the study will first be discussed, followed by the core tenet, which is learning support. Key concepts synonymous with learning support will be conceptualized to establish and/or further develop an understanding of teachers' learning support behaviour. Even more importantly, reflection on the readings will help to set parameters for a clear understanding of the significant concepts. Following this, I will review the relevant literature covering secondary school teachers' responses to their experiences of supporting learners with diverse needs in the classroom.

## 2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The bio-ecological model was deemed appropriate as an interactive theoretical framework within which to explore the teachers' experiences of supporting learners with diverse needs in secondary schools. Responsible teachers interact constantly with all the learners in their classrooms (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Karnik, 2009, p.199). In recent years, however, they have had to move away from the "linear causation model" to one where both they and their learners "interact with and influence one another in dynamic and complex ways" (Hay, 2002, p.94). By using an 'ecological lens' it becomes possible to appreciate how teachers can support all learners through understanding their unique contexts. Bronfenbrenner's original model of 1979 emphasized the importance of the context, a factor which cannot be overlooked (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). However, the most recent or "mature" version (Tudge et al., 2009, p.198; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is about exploring and understanding the interactions and interrelationships between the teacher and learner, with the emphasis on their mutual development within the learning context (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.10).

The design of the present study focuses on the critical element of process (proximal processes) in teachers' descriptions of how they experience learning support in the classroom (Tudge et al., 2009, p.199). The application of the bio-ecological perspective, with focus on the proximal processes, is not significant without taking into account the power of teachers' own characteristics and insights (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.12). Furthermore, the bio-ecological model makes a critical distinction between the concepts of "environment" and "process". The second concept, "process", in particular is significant for teachers' relationships with learners with diverse needs. More specifically, it indicates a connection between aspects of the individual teacher and the classroom context where the outcome is to support all the learners in their learning (Tudge et al., 2009, p.199). The "Process-Person-Context-Time" (PPCT) is recognized as the essence of Bronfenbrenner's model, as it describes human development as a process which takes place throughout human lives (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.11; Tudge et al., 2009, p.199). On the whole, the focus is on the teachers' proximal relationships with all learners, with everybody learning from each other and developing in the classroom context (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.11; Donald, Lazarus &

Lolwana, 2010, p.36). In what follows I will make explicit my intention of using Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model.

The relationship between teachers and learners is seen as part of a system in which relationships are understood as a whole, as recursive, and not as separate or isolated from learning itself. Teachers have to support learners through a dynamic and complex mediational process (Hay, 2002, p.94; Donald et al., 2010, p. 37). "The vital role the teacher plays in his or her own development" is significant for all learning (Tudge et al., 2009, p.199). Teachers' development, whether professional or proximal, is thus the product of interactions within micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems (Swart & Pettipher, 2011), implying that human development is much more complex than a simple relationship of cause and effect (Hay, 2002). Thomas (1992, as cited in Kinsella & Senior, 2008) noted that ecological thinking is a re-positioning of our understanding of nature, rather than a new model or approach.

Proximal processes are the key to the development of human beings in Bronfenbrenner's model. The development of teachers' personal characteristics will be influenced by the context and by changes over time, and these in turn can influence the learning support process (Swart & Pettipher, 2011; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). Although this study is not about analysing the development of teachers as such, but rather about their proximal processes, "conditions and processes producing continuity and change over time" as well as their interactive support experiences will be discussed (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.995) as they relate to two "propositions" (Tudge et al., 2009, p.200). Importantly, the following propositions from Bronfenbrenner's model were used in principle to explain the teachers' interactive experiences while supporting learners in the classroom.

In the case of this study, according to the first proposition, teachers develop through constant interaction with their learners in the classroom environment and by giving them continuous regular support (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). However, such reciprocal interactions become progressively more complex following the introduction of learners with diverse needs in the mainstream classroom (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Proximal

processes are further characterized by two prominent developmental features, competence and dysfunction.

Competence, in the case of this study, is the measure of a teacher's knowledge, continuous professional training and development, skills and ability to regulate his or her own behaviour. Accepting Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) argument about applying the principles of their model, it could be argued that teachers develop their own competence and that this is relevant while carrying out learning support. Teachers in fact are able to respond to learners' diverse needs, whether physical or psychological. Even more importantly, those who engage and support learners in disadvantaged contexts are more likely to help prevent learning breakdown among those with diverse needs. Given the teacher's responsiveness and deliberate interactive support, such learners are more likely to show significant progress and achieve effective learning behaviour (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Once again, research confirms that teachers' most important and powerful roles are in supporting learners in the class. Thus the effects of interactive supporting relationships between teachers and learners seem to be more influential than classroom context in which learning support occurs.

Dysfunction could reflect the failure of teachers to control and integrate supportive developmental behaviour of learners with diverse needs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Learners whose proximal processes have broken down in the classroom could be labelled as having learning difficulties. It is therefore argued that effective learning support from the teacher is more likely to produce successful outcomes. A particular concern is the link between lack of support and the failure of learners in disadvantaged environments to achieve successful learning outcomes. It is postulated that, given effective interactive support from the class teacher over a period of time, "they will show greater improvement over their own problem behaviours as a function of teacher responsiveness" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.1002). Equally important, educational support for the larger community could be of benefit to the learners. Once again, the effects of proximal processes between teachers and learners seem to be vital for achieving learning support (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The bio-ecological model, however, is used in this study to provide a model for understanding the gap between teachers' intention to provide consistent effective learning support and their failure in practice. Breakdown in learning can be due to "exposure" during teaching experiences. This depends on the nature or level of interaction (proximal processes) between the teacher and learners (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p.118). According to Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), teachers can be exposed in various ways. Duration, frequency, interruption, timing and intensity of aspects all play a role during interactive learning support. "Duration" refers to how often it takes place where as "timing" denotes how long this interactive learning support takes place with the learners. The question then arises, does the learning support take place without "interruption", is it organized, and does it occur regularly? This is most important because any delays can potentially result in breakdown of learning. The next crucial dimension is the "timing" or stage of development in the learners' life when the support takes place. Notably, older learners might need different kinds of mediation during interactive learning support.

Intensity refers to the teachers' level of making meaning or the passion with which they support learners (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). However, it is important to bear in mind that these influences depend on the evolving characteristics of the teacher, specifically in the classroom context, over a period of time (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009).

The second proposition comprises four components, namely form, power, content and the direction of the proximal processes, which can affect the development of the person in a specific context. However, propositions one and two are interdependent, that is, both the teacher and the learners are part of learning support experiences (Tudge et al., 2009, p.996). Importantly, proximal processes in this study imply that teachers must completely engage in the learning support process with their learners. Also, to be effective, support must take place "on a fairly regular basis over an extended period of time" (Tudge et al., 2009, p. 996). To be effective in the classroom, it must last long enough to become "increasingly more complex", rather than simply using the same teaching style. As noted, proximal processes are not one-directional; instead learning takes place for teachers and learners, with both encouraged to be part of a reciprocal learning experience.

Adolescents are at a complex developmental phase of their life. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) explain that as “children grow older, their developmental capacities increase both in level and range; therefore, to continue to be effective, the corresponding proximal processes must also become more extensive and complex to provide for the future realisation of evolving potentials” (p.997). This may also help us to understand and explore how the teachers’ own experiences can influence their practices and interactive behaviour in the classroom (Tudge et al., 2009). Olson, Chalmers and Hoover (1997) support the notion that the competencies necessary for general education teachers at the secondary level include the attributes of tolerance, reflection, responsibility, warmth, and acceptance (Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel, & Black, J. 2009). Nel et al. (2012) note that interactive processes affect teachers’ own growth, development and understanding in their teaching practice, and in return affect their behaviour in the educational context.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) noted the following regarding the second proposition:

*The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment - both immediate and more remote - in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived* (p.996).

The three remaining concepts, person, context and time, are examined in the following discussion.

Person characteristics can be defined as the bio-psychosocial, cognitive and socio-emotional features of the teachers, and are regarded as measures for effective interactive learning support. It could be argued that the effectiveness of the proximal processes in learning support influence its value and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.1009). Three “process-relevant person characteristics”, namely person force characteristics (dispositions), ecological resources and demand characteristics are relevant (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.1009; Swart & Pettipher, 2011, p.12). These person characteristics are significant

and are likely to play a role in the development of teachers' abilities and understanding of the power that proximal processes can play in implementing support for all learners in diverse classrooms (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Person force characteristics or behavioural dispositions are those features which actively initiate proximal processes and sustain learning support. Characteristics can equally influence or hinder (developmentally disrupt) the learning support process (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Person force characteristics used as a principle in this study which shows that the teacher can include impulsive behaviour, distraction, aggression and violence, shyness, feelings of insecurity, unresponsiveness, inability to comply, and difficulty in maintaining emotions and behaviour while applying learning support (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Positive characteristics include curiosity, actively participating with others, responding to creativity initiated by others, being willing to wait for the outcomes, and developing knowledge, skill and experience over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, pp.1009, 1011). The teacher's temperament, motivation and persistence in responding to the learners' support needs are also significant in the process.

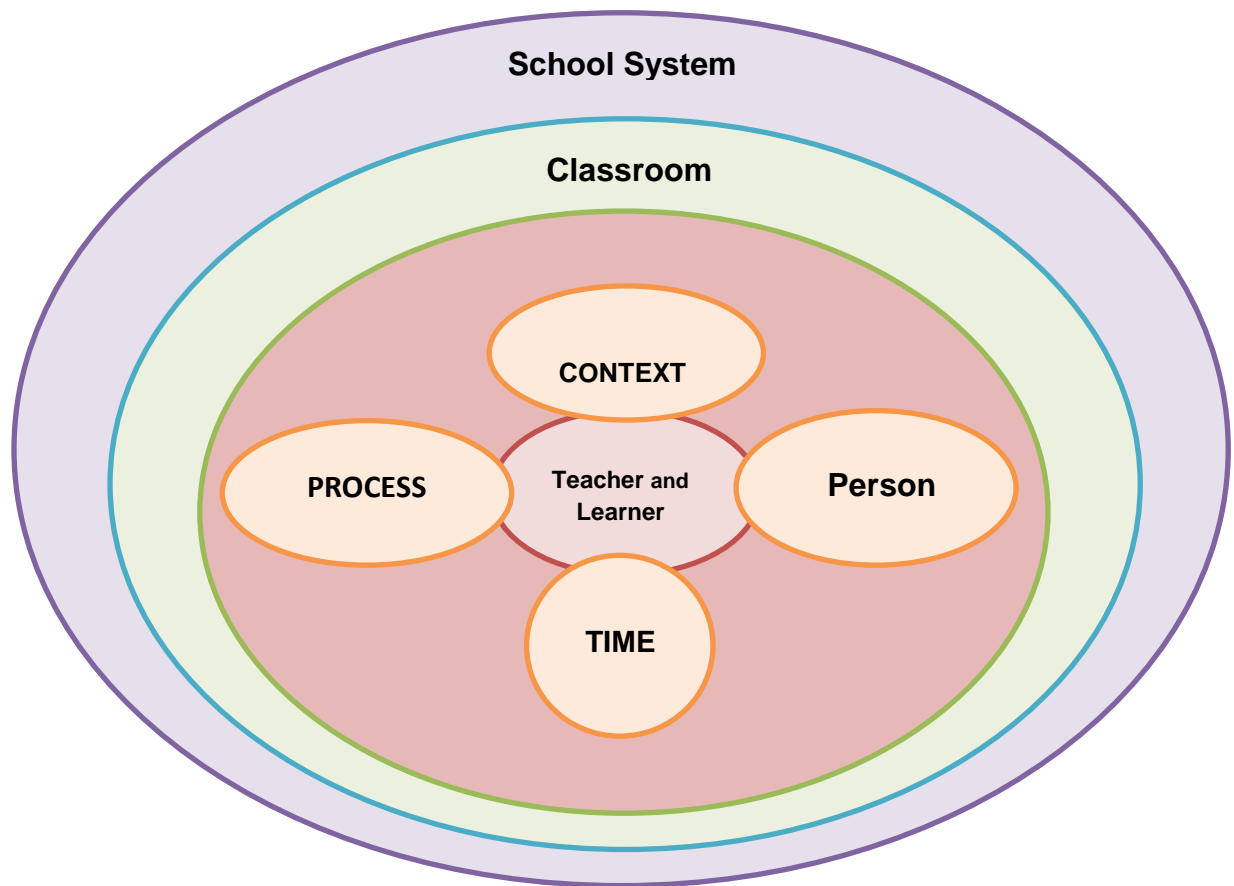
Demand characteristics or "personal stimulus" characteristics refer to the teachers' age, gender, race or physical appearance, and can influence interaction during learning (Tudge et al., 2009, p. 200; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, pp.1011, 1012). An equally significant aspect is resource characteristics, which include those past experiences, skills, cognitive functions, and social needs, educational and professional opportunities which do not have an immediate or obvious influence on the teachers (Tudge, et al., 2009). Both person force characteristics and demand characteristics are involved in the support process between teachers and learners.

Time, which is crucial at different levels of teachers' experiences, is divided into micro-time, meso-time and macro-time (Tudge et al., 2009). Micro-time covers interaction between the teacher and learners during learning support activities. Meso-time relates to the consistency of the learning support process as it takes place in the classroom. Macro-time, on the other hand, encompasses the various life experiences which can influence the teacher's understanding of such interaction. Change and the advent of inclusive education have had



an influence on teachers as change agents and role-players in implementing support. To do this effectively, they must adapt to include mediation and collaborative decision-making in their roles. This has further meant a change in attitudes, since these are ambitious changes calling for a great deal of learning on the part of teachers (Swart & Oswald, 2008; Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

In conclusion, I represent my understanding of the classroom as a micro-system in figure 2.1 on the following page. It is however important to explain my use of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological version for the design of the theoretical framework for this study. My focus was on the critical element of understanding the teachers' process (proximal processes), as this was relevant to providing learning support in the classroom context. However, teachers' person characteristics influence the proximal processes during interactive learning support, so these can be classified as demand characteristics. The context (classroom) has an influence on the proximal processes. Finally, the time during which these proximal processes develop, as they are mutually influenced by person characteristics and context, affects the teachers' understanding of learning support for those with diverse needs (Tudge et al., 2009, pp. 201,202).



**Figure 2.1 Schematic representation adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological framework**

The classroom context involves four interrelated systems. The context in which the teachers and learners engage is significant for interactive learning support. For the purpose of this study, therefore, the focus is on the microsystem of the classroom. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994, as cited in Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), a microsystem comprises a set of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the teachers in a given face-to-face setting. It has particular physical, social, and symbolic features which invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in a sustained, progressively more complex interaction in the immediate environment (p.1013).

## **2.3 IMPLICATIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Inclusion has two implications for teachers. It increases learners' participation, and it reduces exclusion from learning support experiences in the classroom (Booth, 1999; Du Plessis, 2013).

For a long time, South African education operated under a policy of separate systems. With the new education system, there came a view that "the objective of any education system is providing quality education for all learners, regardless of their educational level and all learners deserve nothing less than a quality education and training that would provide them with opportunities for lifelong learning, the world of meaningful participation in society as productive citizens" (Du Plessis, 2013, p.76).

Hall (2002) noted that prior to 1994 South African education "involved a different approach to identifying and attempting to resolve difficulties that arise in classrooms" (p.32). However, after 1994 an inclusive approach was introduced, with changes including the development of learning support practices in a classroom culture of collaboration and active participation for all learners (Hall, 2002). The Department of Education (2002) found that many learners were increasingly at risk due to social, emotional, physical or cognitive barriers, but were still being placed in regular classes. It was clear that even in regular classes such learners were in need of effective learning support from their teachers. Against this backdrop, programmes were developed to support these learners in the classroom. This meant a commitment to "inclusive learning support practices". This formed the basis for the delivery of education support services designed to reach all learners (Du Plessis, 2013, p.78).

Consistent with findings in other countries "The growing demand for inclusive practices within mainstream schools resulted in classroom teachers having to take direct responsibility for the individual learning needs of all learners within the setting" (Rix et al., 2009, p.1). However, such demands have implications for those classroom teachers whose learners have diverse needs. Leaving behind the inequalities which existed in education in South Africa prior to 1994 (Mosoge & Taunyane, 2009), teachers in mainstream schools were now faced with the change to an inclusive education system. With inclusion, they

encountered challenges which meant considering different ways to support learners with diverse learning needs. Since the implementation of inclusive education, they have had to contend with various problems around providing learners with the support to which they are entitled. As discussed in chapter one, many teachers work in overcrowded classes, with limited resources, language diversity and many other challenges. Certainly, many find ways of their own to support learners with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms (Eloff & Kwegte, 2007). Consequently “what the teacher achieves in the classroom has a telling effect on the quality of education in general” (Rogan, 2007, p.98). This has a significant effect on teachers’ strengths as human beings (Hay, 2002). Thus many feel that, while they lack the necessary skills to support learners (Magare, et al., 2010), they are still seen as “key-role players” in inclusive classrooms (p.53). The implications of this when implementing a new policy deserves serious consideration (Hay, et al., 2001).

Teachers themselves need support when implementing inclusion. The new policies emphasize the “what”, rather than the “how” when asking teachers to make meaning of implementation of the policies. As I have shown, inclusion has direct implications for the teachers and how they manage their classrooms. They are the indicators and “catalysts” for learners’ successful learning outcomes (Mosoge & Taunyane, 2009, p.2). Forlin and Chambers (2011) found that, although teachers were familiar with policies, they often felt less confident, lacked the skills to give effective support, and faced the stress of dealing with concerns arising from inclusion in classrooms. The implementation of inclusive education in South Africa involved the development of significant policies to include and support “all learners’ diverse needs in the classroom, in order to avoid learning breakdown or exclusion and in this way promote effective teaching and learning” (Hall, 2002, p.32). However, the goal of these significant policies as noted in section 1.1 have to be applied in practice for the successful support for learners with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms.

Education White Paper 6 (EWP 6): Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001a) promoted support for all learners in mainstream schools, with the understanding that problems were not in the learner but originated in the environment. In turn, this meant acknowledging the problems latent in the environment (D’Amant, 2012) and intrinsic barriers related to medical conditions and medical disabilities

(Nel et al., 2012). Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001a) began as a standing policy and was recognized as a guide to implementing the inclusion of all learners. Thus the EWP6 (DoE, 2001a) provided the framework for a national strategy to achieve an inclusive education system, one which would include all learners with learning needs, even though there was still a lack of support for learners with diverse needs (Walton & Lloyd, 2011). Research findings from relevant studies show that teachers in South African schools have limited experience and understanding of the policy (DoE, 2001b). Reasons given for this statement include inadequate professional development and training, coupled with the teachers' own beliefs about and attitudes to implementation (Swart et al., 2002; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The reality is that change and new expectations can evoke mixed feelings among teachers who are responsible for translating such policies into practice (Ntombela, 2011). Even though EWP6 (DoE, 2001a) highlights strengthened school-based support services and district support teams made up of staff from provincial districts, teachers often take the blame for the failure to implement interventions (Swart & Oswald, 2008).

Over the last twenty years, policymakers have called for classroom reform, to improve the support practices of teachers and thus to improve learning outcomes (Swart et al., 2002). Teachers stand in the front line, forming a link between policy demands and support in the classroom. Whatever their personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs, they are still responsible for all their learners diverse needs (Bansilal, 2011). Inclusive education is concerned with transforming classroom support and is consequently dependent on the teachers' willingness and ability to successfully put the concept into practice but, teachers need to be supported.

## **2.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR TEACHERS**

Teachers faced a paradigm shift, one which was meant to “embrace the call for establishing an inclusive education and training system that accommodates all learners ...Yet at the same time we acknowledge that establishing an inclusive education and training system cannot be achieved overnight but only through taking definitive and bold first steps” (DoE, 1997). According to Skrtic (1995, p.4), a paradigm or world view is “a shared pattern” (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, pp.5, 6). Putting in place a new paradigm or understanding of a significant “tradition-shattering” change means that teachers would need to change their thinking and attitudes and reflect on their experiences and beliefs (Jackobs & Farrell, 2003, p.1). Specific

world views can either restrict or enhance one's understanding of new theories or strategies. The aim of this study is to understand teachers' world views and how their views inform their experiences of learning support.

The paradigm shift in education required teachers to move away from traditional teaching practices. These became inadequate in classrooms following the rapid change to an inclusive education system. Classrooms became more diverse, taking in diverse languages, cultures, socio-economic status and political orientation. Although the new policies represented a major shift from an exclusive education system to one based on inclusive practices, it is often asked whether teachers are prepared and ready for supportive practices in the classroom (Hay et al., 2001). If all learners with diverse needs are to be included in the classroom, then teachers will have to accept that offering equal education opportunities means ensuring equal access, including for those who need diverse learning support (Swart, & Pettipher, 2011). Without exception, teachers should be concerned that learners with diverse needs receive their rightful support during classroom learning (Wiebe Berry, 2006).

The shift from the medical model to the social-ecological theoretical model is important to understanding teachers' reactions to supporting learners with diverse needs (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). It is fundamental to developing effective learning support in the culture and climate of the classroom, as well as in developing policies which will benefit all learners with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms (Hall, 2002). Even though both these approaches are extremes on a continuum, defining teachers' responsibilities in different ways, both describe learners with "diverse educational needs that are affected by the beliefs and attitudes of those who interact with the learners" (Clark, Dyson, Millward & Fulton, 1995, p. 1). However, moving towards learning support relationships cannot be achieved simply by modifying traditional "teacher-centred", "medical-model" strategies (Carrington & Elkins, 2002, p.52).

#### **2.4.1 Comparing the medical deficit model and the social ecological model**

- According to Booth (1999), the following were the most significant features of the medical deficit model: Special needs education presented severe limitations, as it

was connected to educational difficulties, learner deficits, and deflected attention from barriers to learning that existed in all aspects in the system (p.165).

- It was assumed that learners who experienced problems with literacy and numeracy were low academic achievers (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).
- The focus was on the learners' difficulties, so attention was drawn away from other learners, teaching strategies, classroom culture and policies which would minimize learning difficulties (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).
- Teachers were unskilled and encouraged to believe that learners with difficulties needed specialist support (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001, p.307).
- The origin of a disability was seen as being within the learner (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).
- Learners were assessed, diagnosed, taken out of the mainstream classroom and external services were provided to "fix" the problem, with such learners segregated from the classroom (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001, p.307).
- The model was designed to find out "what is wrong" with the learner. Such learners received "remediation" from professional experts, outside the classroom" (Nel et al., 2012, p.9).
- The specialists took control of decisions regarding the learners.
- The learners had no active participation in the support process, with the result that they became socially isolated (Swart, 2004).
- The medical deficit or within-child model (Swart & Pettipher, 2011) focused on biological discriminations. It was very much the reason for a specialist culture which influenced teachers' attitudes, understandings, beliefs and competencies about learning support practices and skills (Engelbrecht, 2006).
- Simpson (2008) proposed that "remediation" was only a temporary relief measure and hampered the learner's ability to progress (p.159).
- The effect of remediation was "mediocre" and disappointing (Simpson, 2008, p.160).
- Likewise, remedial experiences were more likely to create further barriers, as well as undermining the learners' potential (Simpson, 2008, p.160).
- The medical deficit model was a deeply ingrained way of thinking about learners with learning disabilities (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

- Teachers were trained in this model, using it to work with learners in their classes on a daily basis.
- The model was discriminatory and restrictive (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

Change in education in South Africa can be seen as moving away from the segregated, medical model and 'special needs' towards an integrated, socio-ecological system, with support services more centrally infused into the general education classroom (Nel et al., 2012, p.9).

According to the social ecological model, teachers who are dealing with learners that experience complex and diverse barriers need to adopt a different way of teaching. "So we have to improve what we teach and make it useable to learners and we have to improve how we teach it" (Glasser, 2009, p.79).

However, the social ecological model extends beyond the narrow interpretation of providing remedial education for learners with diverse needs (D'Amant, 2012):

- According to Eloff and Kgwele (2007), "support in inclusive education is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon" (p.353).
- The focus is on teachers' effective, meaningful learning support, which requires the acknowledgment of individual needs (Patterson, 2007, p.427; Du Plessis, Conley, & Du Plessis, 2007, p.106).
- According to Skrtic (1995), support is about celebrating diversity in a caring way. Since the report of the National Department of Education, Quality Education for All, was published in 1997, it has become evident that learning support is the way forward in regular education (Hay et al., 2001, p.213).
- There seems to be no single interpretation of learning support. Inclusive education has been mainly motivated by a human rights perspective, with a specific focus on learners with diverse needs, but also offers educational and developmental advantages for regular learners, provided it is well understood and mediated (Lebeer, Struyf, De Maeyerb, Wilssensc, Timbremontd & Denysd, 2010; Swart, 2004).



- Learning support calls for a much deeper change in areas such as attitudes, beliefs, values and understanding of the barriers to learning, all of which will mean a paradigm shift in the thinking of teachers (Ntombela, 2011).
- According to Swart (2004), “Making sense of learning support and developing the skills to mediate support require an open mind, a willingness to learn, extensive reading, debate, and personal reflection about our own values, attitudes, experiences, interpretations and actions” (p.231).
- According to Ntombela (2011), “Learning support is a ‘mindset’ about educating students and not just about a place or a method of delivering instruction” (p.6).
- It is a philosophy and is part of the very understanding of the learner (Lipsky & Gartner 1997).

In conclusion, it is clear that implementing support cannot be achieved overnight. This seems to be an acknowledgement that teachers’ understanding of learning support is complex and multi-faceted and will “play a major role in successfully planning the implementation of inclusive education” (Hay et al., 2001, p.214).

## **2.5 THE TEACHERS’ ROLES AND CHALLENGES IN THE CLASSROOM**

The following is a recollection of a teacher’s experience of challenges in the classroom:

*“This school and my classroom should be a community of students and teachers who feel safe enough to make mistakes, to share insights, and to take risks. The primary goal of the learning environment should be to engage teachers and learners in the process of thinking. In creating this environment, careful planning and positive relationships are essential elements. Because modelling makes a difference in learning, I will strive to uphold high standards and expectations and to develop better problem-solving skills (Phelps, 2008, p.119).*

The above account is evidence of teachers’ roles, challenges and dedication in mediating learning in the classroom. Teaching is recognized as the most complex, demanding and challenging profession (Vesely, Saklofske & Leschied, 2013).

Previously learners in mainstream classes were referred to either as being “normal” or as having a “disability”. The social-ecological model, however, refers to “barriers” in people’s lives which hinder their full participation and the achievement of their full potential (Smit &

Mpya, 2011, p.30). Such barriers can place learners at risk of learning problems (Smit & Mpya, 2011). Those who experience learning barriers often lack prior knowledge and struggle to complete work in time (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Furthermore, the teachers themselves can set up barriers for learners in diverse secondary school classrooms, if they fail to plan their time, inadequately prepare their lessons, or show insufficient professional development (Coleman, 2000).

Various factors are responsible for barriers to learning. These can be intrinsic circumstances within the learner, or extrinsic, meaning conditions outside the individual or in the environment. Intrinsic barriers are defined as perceptual, cognitive or physical problems of a medical nature (Nel, et al., 2012). A number of researchers (Swart & Pettipher, 2011, pp.19, 20; Smit & Mpya, 2011, p. 25; DoE, 2001b; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001; Magare, et al., 2010, p.53) have noted barriers relevant to the South African context identified by the NCSNET & NCESS (DoE, 1997):

- Socio-economic barriers: poverty, limited access to basic services, experience of danger, unsafe infrastructure and buildings, inaccessible classrooms.
- Barriers due to physical difficulties: these can be biological or physical, cognitive, sensory, or related to development and learning impairment.
- Negative attitudes, understanding and perceptions of diverse needs.
- Inflexible curriculum, lack of adaptable methods and strategies.
- Difficulties with the language of learning, with reading, writing, mathematics, speech, language and communication skills.
- Support services either lacking or dysfunctional.
- Inappropriate or inadequate policies and regulations from the Education Department.
- Lack of community and parental support.

Most teachers recognize the barriers in their classrooms. Their understanding of and attitude to learners with diverse needs is the key to providing appropriate support (Adelman & Taylor, 2000).

The biggest challenge, however, is to effectively implement support for learners with diverse learning needs in secondary school classrooms (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). One of the most obvious challenges for secondary school teachers concerns the amount of content knowledge learners must master. Research on learning support in secondary schools (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001), and implementing quality support in such schools has proved complex and challenging (Kozik et al., 2009). However, despite the various challenges, including those described in chapter one, many secondary school teachers do offer support for learners with diverse needs (Kozik et al., 2009).

Teachers today are faced with unique challenges, many of which are due to the persistence of inequalities which existed in educational provision prior to 1994. Since inclusive education was introduced, many learners with barriers to learning are included in mainstream classes. However, “far from being included”, they do not receive adequate learning support (Timor & Burton, 2006, p.497). According to the Department of Education, “barriers to learning and development” can also be understood as “factors which led to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, which lead to learning breakdown and prevent learners from accessing educational provision” (DoE, 1997, p.12; DoE, 2002, p.131).

Teachers in South African schools today face heavy workloads and increased responsibilities. They have to contend with larger learner-teacher ratios, a broad range of learning needs, less planning time, varied instructional layouts, increased responsibilities, and raised expectations for learners passing their grades (Scanlon & Baker, 2012; Swayer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007). Olson et al., (1997) echo teachers’ concerns about struggling to plan for individual learning differences, with anxiety about workload and adequate preparation to accommodate the curriculum. Learners’ skills become increasingly significant at secondary-school level, often needing “teacher-centred” support. Given the looming barriers to complete access to the general education curriculum for learners with diverse needs, teachers face concerns of their own about insufficient professional training and development (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001, p. 267).

Adolescents spend a great deal of time with their teachers in the classroom. Quality relationships are thus the basis for creating effective support. Since teachers are significant others to learners, the classroom is an important arena for such relationships. As noted in chapter one, many adolescents are constantly confronted with insecure environments, with abuse, poverty, discrimination, violence, addiction, limited educational resources, language diversity, and the terrible effects of HIV/AIDS on families, teachers and the learners themselves (Eloff & Kgwete, 2007). As a result, they often manifest behavioural, emotional and social problems which affect their power to learn (Sulaiman, 2010). Sulaiman (2010) noted that such barriers can have a destructive effect on teachers' own goals, hopes and motives for creating positive support.

An inclusive classroom involves much more than just the presence of learners with diverse needs in a regular class. A long history of educational innovation and change was founded on celebrating difference and a philosophy of acceptance where all learners are accepted, valued, and treated with respect. Today, teachers are involved with a complex daily task of making decisions and mediating learning support to learners with diverse needs (Todd, 2007). Such interactive relationships place the responsibility on competent teachers to assess and develop their own skills, knowledge and experience in order to effectively support learners' development (Nel et al., 2012; Donald et al., 2002; Hay, 2002). Simultaneously, teachers should respect their learners' diversity and appreciate them as a whole people with diverse learning support needs (Everington, ter Avest, Bakker & van der Want, 2011).

The role of the teachers is thus a central component in the success of inclusive education in the classroom (Forlin, & Chambers, 2011). Adapting to change and the demands of the new education scenario may, however, be more challenging for teachers who were trained before 1994 (Mosoge & Taunyane, 2009), since they have been subjected to numerous changes and challenges (Bansilal, 2011). While many generally embrace change in education as positive and adopt a learner-centred approach, many also continue to work in their classrooms using incompatible methods and practices conforming to previous models, such as the medical model (Mattson & Harley, 2003).

Forlin (1999) noted the need for mainstream classroom teachers to increase their involvement, collaborating and setting goals for supporting learners. According to Phelps (2008), “making happen what you believe in” is the ultimate aim and a building block for leadership (p.119). Teachers can fulfil multiple roles as they encounter obstacles in classrooms on a daily basis (Phelps, 2008). Since role as mediators has a telling effect on learning (Mosoge & Taunyane, 2009), they need to create a culture and climate that stimulate learning support encounters in which all are valued (Dyson, 2001). Prawat (1989) emphasizes the teacher’s role as fostering communication, encouraging change, adopting mediation skills and building respectful, trusting relationships with all the learners.

Despite the commitment to care and support, teachers as managers are concerned about learners’ behaviour in large classrooms, where a wide range of learners are placed together. Evidently, for effective support diverse classrooms demand “well-managed” learners (Capizzi, 2009, p. 2). Capizzi (2009) claims that a positive learning support environment, one based on consistent behaviour, is of paramount importance.

The teaching profession is understood as a complex of virtues (intrinsic worth) and principles that are vital to the teachers’ role in the classroom (Husu & Tiri, 2007). It is seen as “an idealised way of being”. Teachers are put on a pedestal and are expected to create effective learning experiences, from which learners can benefit and which will allow them to succeed both in school and beyond (Husu & Tiri, 2007, p.390). When supported in the classroom, learners not only benefit academically, but also emotionally and socially (Husu & Tiri, 2007). Teachers can therefore no longer afford to focus only on academic achievements. They also need to become more responsible for establishing and maintaining support for learners with barriers. Many secondary school teachers have noted that they have lowered their expectations for academic outcomes, but at the same time stress the role of social behaviour in adolescent development. Being aware of the importance of developing social skills, they focus on “demonstrating interpersonal warmth and acceptance” towards those learners who need learning support (Olson et al., 1997, p.30).

In conclusion, teachers have had to rethink their roles as supporters of learners with diverse needs in their classrooms (Glasser, 2009). Westwood (2003) found that those who supported learners most effectively had well managed classrooms where their learners had maximum opportunities for learning. Thus when learners maintain academic focus, both they and their teachers can reach their full potential.

## **2.6 TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING LEARNERS**

According to Campell, MacNamara and Gilroy (2013), "Teachers support in the way they do, not just because of the skills they have or have not learned. The ways they support are also grounded in their backgrounds, their biographies, in the kind of teachers they have become. Their careers, their hopes and dreams, their opportunities and aspirations, or the frustration of these things, are also important for teachers' commitment, enthusiasm and morale" (p.4). To date, little research has been done with the focus on teachers' experiences of supporting learners' with diverse needs in the secondary school classroom.

According to Walker and Greene (2009), competence is a measure of how we understand, observe or identify our own ability to regulate or succeed in a specific setting. Such feelings of being adequate, able or worthy develop over time through various personal or mediated experiences, social influences or interpretations of physical and emotional conditions (Walker & Greene, 2009). In addition, according to Ben-Yehuda, Leyser and Last (2010), these insights allow the teacher to be less critical, to offer positive classroom support, and, instead of looking for problems within the learners, use wide-ranging, adaptable strategies in classes where learners have diverse needs.

Darling-Hammond (1990) noted that teachers who are dedicated to supporting learners have feelings of commitment, believe in themselves, are capable and feel worthy as teachers. The teacher's profession cannot be understood simply as applying procedures and methods. As noted previously, we cannot assume that every teacher will have all the qualities needed to support all the learners facing barriers to learning, development and participation (Lipsky & Gartner 1997). Research has shown that most teachers want to make a significant change and difference in the lives of all their learners. However, the experience of recursive support between learners and teachers shows that genuine emotions and

voluntary interaction can be challenging (Hall, 2002). Nevertheless, committed, effective teachers are more likely to build close supportive relationships with their learners, offering them quality learning experiences (Stornes, Bru & Idsoe, 2008, p.317). Malinen, Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Xu, Nel, Nel and Tlale (2013) noted that a teacher's ability consists of multiple concepts. Ben-Yehuda et al. (2010) sees teachers' efficacy as connected to their behaviour and effective learning support experiences are "most powerful since they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can do what it takes to succeed" (Malinen et al., 2013, p.36). Some secondary school teachers may feel more successful teaching certain participants to particular learners in specific contexts, while perceiving themselves less able and effective under different circumstances (Malinen et al., 2013). This factor may be relevant for those secondary school teachers who have to support learners with diverse needs.

Research suggests that teachers have various "concerns about their ability to instruct mainstreamed students, a lack of time and resources" (Ben-Yehuda et al., 2010, p.19). On the whole, teachers' sense of their own ability can be linked to their performance in the classroom (Ben-Yehuda et al., 2010). Depending on this, they will believe or question their own capacity to support learners with diverse needs. Even though teachers' ability to support learners is often limited by their internal or external factors, their beliefs, understanding, skills and abilities could nevertheless still provide effective support practices in the classroom (Ben-Yehuda et al., 2010). Even though they understand the need for such support, teachers often dread having learners with diverse requirements, since they regard themselves as lacking the necessary competencies (Magare et al., 2010). While they are willing and recognize the need to adapt and support learners (Olson et al., 1997), they do not feel equipped with their limited training to cope with the challenges posed by learners with barriers in the classroom (Magare et al., 2010).

In brief, teachers' feelings of inadequacy, coupled with negative attitudes and beliefs about inclusive education, could inhibit them from offering support for those learners with diverse needs (Bothma, 2000). Research indicates that teacher' feelings, whether positive or negative, about learners with diverse needs will affect the way they support them in the classroom (Carrington & Elkins, 2002).

Various researchers have offered their definitions of these concepts. Specific attitudes are related to "a psychological tendency", to how a person expresses their likes or dislikes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.1). Abelson (1979) defined beliefs as a way for people to manipulate their knowledge for a particular purpose or under certain circumstances. Teachers' beliefs and preconceptions can be inconsistent, as they "tend to be eclectic aggregations of cause-effect propositions from many sources, rules of thumb, generalizations drawn from personal experience, beliefs, values, biases, and prejudices" (Abelson, 1979, p.358). These are best described by the teachers themselves, as they react to and interpret their knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Pajares, 1992). Against this background, beliefs also define how teachers feel about themselves and their ability to support learners (Ben-Yehuda et al., 2010).

Teachers are confronted daily with problems in the classroom which are often wrongly understood or interpreted. This can contribute to their uncertainty about learning support (Nespor, 1987). They need to be aware of their positive beliefs, rather than concerned with their inability to support learners with diverse needs. Such awareness can play a key role in ensuring learning support which is both effective and relevant (Ben-Yehuda et al. 2010). This suggests that an alternative perspective is needed, as teachers' belief structures have implications for support practices in the classroom (Pajares, 1992).

Nespor (1987, p.317) argued that *"in spite of arguments that people's "beliefs" are important influences on the ways they conceptualize tasks and learn from experience . . . little attention has been accorded to the structure and functions of teachers' beliefs about their roles, their students, the subject matter areas they teach, and the schools they work in"* (p.317).

The following conclusions are linked with teachers' experiences about their role of supporting learners (Ben-Yehuda, et al., 2010):

- The type and severity of the learners' support needs, as well as specific emotional and behavioural problems of learners in the classroom, have an influence on attitudes.



- The type of teacher training and experience, specific knowledge of barriers, as well as more supportive feelings regarding diverse support needs, impact on attitudes.
- When confronting barriers to learning, female teachers seem more supportive of learners with diverse needs than male teachers.

We should also remember that teachers are human, and that many hold strong beliefs about learning support. A well-researched study by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) showed that the majority of teachers had serious reservations about their experiences of supporting learners with diverse needs in mainstream classes.

Three components of teachers' attitudes, beliefs, emotions and reactions, are relevant to the present theoretical framework, with a focus on the teachers' proximal processes during learning support. "Open-minded thinking" is a key person characteristic or disposition of effective teachers, reflecting a tendency to be more flexible and adaptable (Elik, Weiner & Corkumc (2010, pp.127, 128). Those teachers who are "open-minded" thinkers typically have more flexible belief systems and are more adaptable (Elik et al., 2010, p.130). In a collaborative study carried out by Swedish and South African academics, it was found that teachers' beliefs about learning support in their classrooms played an important part in their ability to offer effective support for learners with diverse needs (Department of Education, 2001b; Swart et al., 2002).

On the other hand, teachers can express negative attitudes and resistance to supporting learners (Walton & Lloyd, 2011), as a result of inadequate support and training, a heavy class load, and limited time to plan lessons and collaborate with colleagues (DeSimone & Parmar, 2006). Reeves (2006) confirm that teachers' perceptions, their attitudes and the learning environment influence their understanding of learning support. Further research has highlighted other factors, among them a chronic lack of time, a perceived rise of teachers' workloads, and feelings of professional inadequacy (Reeves, 2006).

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) carried out an in-depth study on teachers' attitudes to learning support. Their findings showed that those who were already experienced in support practices displayed positive attitudes, whereas those without such experience had

differing testimonies. They argued that, while teachers might have “neutral or negative” attitudes to support, it was possible to change over time once relevant support structures had been implemented (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, p.134).

There is, however, a further point to be considered. Research reveals that various factors can influence teachers’ beliefs about learning support. These include, for instance, the nature and intensity of the learners’ needs and the context or environment. The following are significant interrelated factors from Avramidis and Norwich (2002):

- With regard to gender, teachers’ responses were inconsistent; however, more female teachers support learners than male teachers.
- Age and teaching experience were further factors that had an influence on teachers’ attitudes. Research found that those with experience of more than fourteen years showed a less positive attitude to supporting learners, while other contributions were inconclusive.
- Teachers’ attitudes to learning support were further influenced by the grade level at which they taught. Their attitudes changed and they were reluctant to support learners in higher grades. This might be related to the emphasis on delivering content.
- Another important factor influencing teachers’ attitudes was their training relating to learners with diverse needs. Research findings were in favour of training which enhanced teachers’ attitudes to supporting learners with learning problems.
- Recently, research has shown that teacher’s beliefs, more specifically their teaching styles and ability to adapt to learners with diverse needs, have an influence on their attitudes.
- Studies related to teachers’ wider self-beliefs about learning support in mainstream schools, such as their socio-political views, varied across countries.

More specifically, teachers in secondary schools seem to have less positive attitudes to learning support, and this may have an influence on how they provide support in an inclusive classroom (Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Findings from a study done by Olson et al. (1997) on secondary school teachers’ complex attitudes to learning support concluded that teachers’ general attitudes varied, that they anticipated problems with integration, but accepted their responsibility for supporting learners with

diverse needs in their classrooms. Secondary school teachers' attitudes to learners with diverse needs are even more complex (Olson et al., 1997).

In brief, research recognizes that experienced teachers hold diverse beliefs about support in education, its essential outcomes, its value, and their own abilities; for many, however, the value of developing their own learning support capacities is not yet appreciated (Pajares, 1992).

## **2.7 COLLABORATION**

“Collaboration, is a process by which people work co-operatively together to accomplish a task, or series of tasks, of benefit to one or more people by reaching a mutual understanding of how to solve problems and resolve complex ethical and practical dilemmas, becomes a pivotal factor in determining the quality of the learning support relationship between teachers and learners” (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010, p.91). This interpretation of increased sharing and collaboration between mainstream teachers and learners in inclusive classrooms represents “a style for direct interaction between at least two parties voluntarily engaged in a shared learning experience, as they work toward a common goal” (Friend & Cook, 2000, p.6).

Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank and Smith (2004) found that support for learners with diverse needs in the mainstream classroom did not work unless there was effective collaboration among the teachers in the school. In addition, Friend and Cook (2000) identified a number of key characteristics relevant to collaboration. It should be voluntary, with responsibility based on mutual goals and shared equally among the teachers. Equally important, they should consult as a team and share accountability for resources, problem-solving and the development of a belief system of trust and respect (Friend & Cook, 2000). To ensure an effective support system, they should recognize their interdependence on one another and collaborate to offer “quality education for all our learners” (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001, p.316).

Relatively little is known from research about how and whether teachers collaborate and for what reasons they share their experience of support (Thornton, 2006; Swayer & Kaufman,

2007). Even so, collaboration allows them to “be and become”, balancing their personal independence against reciprocity (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010, p.97). Collaboration remains an important factor, offering teachers emotional and social backing and enhancing the values of interdependence (Huxman & Vangen, 2005). It is therefore important to explore their collaborative practices, find out how they support learners, and assess what has already been successfully done. Although collaboration is aimed at the broader context, it can ensure that each learner in the class is afforded support through the mediation of an effective teacher (Pugach, Blanton & Correa, 2011).

Given the current emphasis on collaboration, teachers can support learners effectively through personal relationships, even though time is often a challenge (Olson, Chalmers & Hoover, 1997). In this sense, collaboration between teachers is seen not just as a means, but rather as the end through which they can support learners with diverse needs in their classrooms.

## **2.8 TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

It is important to note, however, that teachers need continuously to develop their professional skills. Hence, *“teacher professional development as a continuing process is increasingly regarded as critical in creating more effective schools and in raising the standards of students’ achievements”* (Moswela, 2006, p. 629). Taking into account the compelling nature of this evidence, the National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 2006) set out to prepare teachers with the academic knowledge they need to maintain effective teaching of learners with diverse needs.

Having considered inclusive education, it is also reasonable to look at teachers’ training as an extended process of changing and adapting to new ways of teaching. Teacher professional development might be one way to make teachers ready to support learners with diverse needs (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Although teachers often recall the ways they were taught themselves and apply these methods in their classrooms, retraining at both practical and theoretical levels is vital in an education system where further changes are foreseen (Ntombela, 2011). Importantly, Mathibe (2007) notes that teacher professional

development should focus on changing teachers' beliefs, encouraging them to improve their skills and knowledge, drawing on shared values to perform their responsibilities well and effectively. Further, research recommends that teachers' confidence and competence be enhanced through support and development programmes, even more so when they are working with learners with barriers. Relevant to this study, Walton and Lloyd (2011) noted that it was vital to support learning for all learners in secondary schools classrooms.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that teachers need to develop beyond their initial training. Such training can equip them with the most recent knowledge, skills, attitudes and new approaches to supporting their learners (Schleicher, 2011).

The following chapter will describe the research design and methodology for this study as well as the motivation for why the design and methods were chosen and deemed most appropriate

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter gives a comprehensive discussion of the paradigm, methodology and relevant questions which guided the research. It also focuses on the research process and describes how the design was structured in order to generate answers to the research questions. In addition, it includes information about data collection techniques, data analysis issues and verification of the findings. Ethical considerations relevant to the study are also discussed. The chapter begins with a reprise of the questions which guided the study.

#### **The research question that guided this study was:**

How do secondary school teachers experience learning support in the classroom context?

The sub-questions for the research were:

- 1) What does learning support involve for secondary school teachers?
- 2) How do teachers support learners with diverse needs in secondary schools?
- 3) What do they perceive they need to support learners with diverse needs in the

classroom? As part of this question, I hoped to find out from the participants what allowed them to support their learners and contribute to successful learning outcomes.

As stated in section 1.4 the aim of the research is therefore to explore and describe teachers' experiences of learning support in secondary school classrooms.

#### **3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

A paradigm is a set of particular views or beliefs on which people base their understanding of the truth (Maree, 2007, p.47). My understanding is that every teacher has a "basic set of beliefs that guides action" from which they create their own meaning and insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p.4). The key philosophical assumption on which I based this research was the interpretive, constructivist paradigm that assumes that people have multiple realities. This would mean seeking a subjective understanding of the teachers' experiences in the secondary school classroom and using true-to-life ways to gather information from them (Maree, 2007).

The above approach offered me a framework for interpretive, constructivist research. Using it, I was able to explore a field of interest in which there was little extant research (Merriam,

2002). Most of such studies were grounded on the practice of three interrelated dimensions of enquiry, those of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Ontology is related to questions about the nature and form of reality and what can be known about a particular phenomenon (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Thus, for this study, I had to ask myself what I believed in, the nature of the reality I was investigating and how I could come to know this phenomenon in more detail. Epistemology refers to what knowledge is and what has been discovered. The assumption is that there is a relationship between the “knower and the known” (Maree, 2007, p.55). Methodology refers to the range of methods and strategies that can be used to collect information and data in order to answer the research questions (Lambert, 2012).

In qualitative research, the key to understanding of the nature of reality lies in the awareness that “meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction”, where the context is never “fixed, single, agreed upon, or measureable” (Merriam, 2002, p.3). In other words, over time people evolve multiple constructions and understandings of reality. For this study, therefore, it was important that I understood and appreciated how teachers made meaning of their experiences in context and how they changed over time (Merriam, 2002). For this reason, I did not attempt to predict future outcomes, but set out only to understand the nature of the teachers’ experiences as I recorded them. This involved examining “what it means working in the specific setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them; what their meanings are; and what the world looks like in that particular setting” (Merriam, 2002, pp.4, 5). The implication for the epistemological process was that I could increase my knowledge and understanding if I carried out the research process in collaboration with the participants (Maree, 2007).

This process of interaction is also shaped by the researcher’s own personal history and by those of the people in the study (Maree, 2007). As myself as the researcher, my “primary instrument” was my own knowledge, experience and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Maree, 2007, p.60). The teachers were my primary resource, constructing a meaning of their context which was not “fixed, single, agreed upon, or a measureable phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p.3). Indeed, my own knowledge could only grow as I recorded the detailed descriptions of the teachers’ experiences, their intentions,

beliefs, values and reasons, meaning making and self-understanding. It has been argued that the social world does not “exist independently of human knowledge” (Henning et al., 2005, p.20). The epistemological view of the interpretive, constructivist paradigm is that the process of research and exploration must take place with those people who have direct experience of the phenomenon under study. Thus the philosophical assumption upon which I based this research was that reality is constructed by interaction, appreciation and understanding of teachers’ experiences as they are “lived” or “felt” or “undergone” (Merriam, 1998, p.6). The next step of the research process depended on the methodology, choosing relevant methods which could assist me with the data gathering process.

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Methodology refers to the means by which a researcher attempts to acquire knowledge, bringing what he or she believes can be known about the world into the known (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Importantly, it relies on finding the appropriate methods with which to carry out the research process (Silverman, 2000). Bearing in mind that the paradigm of this study fell within the interpretive constructivist framework, the methodology was of a qualitative nature. What were the implications of this for the study?

Given the exploratory nature of the study, with its focus on gaining increased insights and understanding of teachers’ experiences in the classroom, qualitative research methods were employed as they were best suited to achieving my stated goals. In addition, I employed the interpretive constructivist paradigm which provided the frame for implementing qualitative methods.

The above provided the background to this qualitative research, where the product was explored through an inductive process. A rich descriptive account of the findings was generated, coupled with relevant references from the literature (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative researchers tend to have a number of characteristics in common. They are interested in “understanding the meaning people have constructed” and how teachers make sense of their learning support experiences in the classroom. In addition, the researcher is the “primary instrument in data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, pp.6, 7), entering the field and collecting data. Interacting with the participants in their natural context is essential to building a relationship. As previously noted, an inductive strategy is important in a



qualitative research. According to the literature, such a strategy is often applied to deduce a theory by which to guide the investigation. In this study, I made deductions from the data in order to explore the findings in the form of themes, sub-themes and categories (Merriam, 1998). The last category focused on the product of the study, which was a rich description of the participants' direct quotes and activities. To carry this out, the researcher needs to be flexible and adapt to any changes which might occur during the research process.

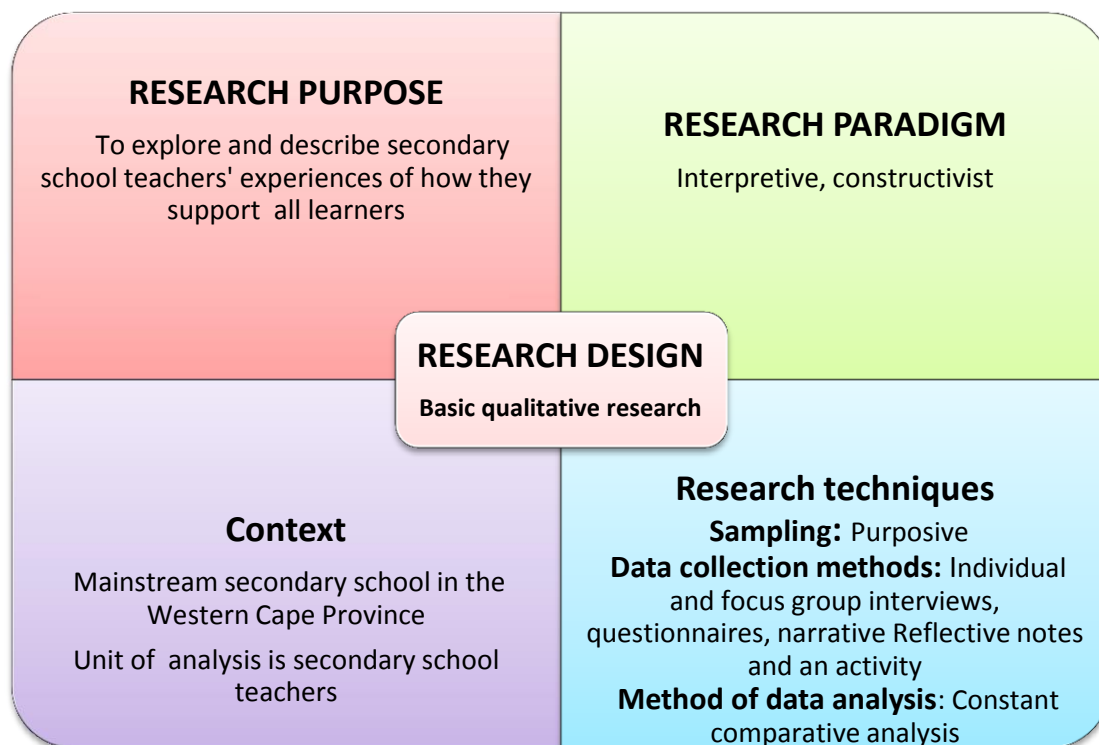
The design of the enquiry was that of a basic qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). As I have shown, the aim was to explore a relatively new area of investigation. Exploratory studies involve making preliminary investigations and giving "thick descriptions of the phenomena" drawn from the teachers' experiences (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p.44). This area of research I chose reflects a persistent phenomenon in education, about which I was curious and which I wanted to understand (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). In order to explore and gain insight into this relatively new area of research, I carried out in-depth interviews and completion of questionnaires and held narrative Reflective notes during the data collection process. To this end, those teachers who had "practical experience" of support in the classroom seemed most suitable for the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p.80).

As I have shown, this study can be categorized as explorative research, using open, flexible, inductive methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Maree, 2007), exploring teachers' experiences concerning a specific classroom problem (Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

### **3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

As discussed in chapter one, a research design involves the planning of scientific inquiry. It specifies what needs to be investigated, and determines the best way to go about this (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). This "blueprint", strategic "framework" or plan of action serves as the connection between the research questions and the execution of the research (Mouton, 2001, p.55).

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006), a research design is sound and coherent when the four components of purpose, paradigm, context and techniques, fit together in a logical and complementary manner within a particular framework (Refer to figure 3.2).



**Figure 3.2 Schematic presentations of the four dimensions of the research design.**

Adapted from Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006)

Further, a coherent design helps the researcher to achieve the goals of the research, address the research questions, and obtain credible and plausible conclusions (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). The research design is less structured than a confirmatory study, which requires extensive analysis of the data (Walden, 2012). As argued above, a basic interpretive qualitative design includes a variety of methods for data collection and analysis of the investigation and design (Henning, et al., 2005). In this study, I had ample background knowledge and a sound understanding of the phenomenon which was to be examined. An “open question” approach was therefore taken, which meant exploring teachers’ experiences of a hitherto relatively little studied phenomenon (Merriam, 2002, p.11). Understanding this process was important when I came to assessing the thoroughness and significance of the reports for the research (Merriam, 2002). I believed interaction with the external world in context was possible through the use of an effective methodology (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The design was coherent because the technique for sampling, collection and analysis of data in the particular context and understanding were well lodged within the interpretive qualitative paradigm and clear within the aims of the study. This enhanced the value of the basic aim, which was to explore and describe teachers’

understanding of their own experiences of learning support in secondary school classrooms (Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

Summing up, the research design connects the theoretical paradigm to the strategies of investigation and the methods used for data collection and analysis (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). It is an all-encompassing strategic framework or plan that guides the process of inquiry, data collection and analysis. Since the purpose and aim have been established, the focus will now be on the context of the research and on the researcher as key to the study.

### **3.4.1 Context of the research**

The context is an important element of an interpretive qualitative study, since people's "experiences and meanings can only emerge in social interaction" (Durrheim & Painter, 2006, p.54). In this study, of one specific secondary school context played an important role and the decisions made were influenced by the purpose and paradigm of the research. In return, these had an influence on the degree of control I had over the context (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). As discussed in chapter one, the study was conducted in a mainstream secondary school in a Cape Winelands district which serves an area populated by black and coloured people. The school has a staff of twenty and a learner population of approximately 800. Contextual problems include absenteeism from school, socio-economic deprivation, an inflexible curriculum, language differences, non-involvement of parents, inadequate support services, disintegration of families, poverty, declining moral and value systems, child abuse, addiction and violence in the community. Most of the teachers working at the school come from elsewhere in the Overberg area.

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), teachers' experiences are best explored by the researcher in the participants' own natural environment.

### **3.4.2 Role of the researcher**

The role of the researcher is central to this process (Maree, 2007). In this study, I was able to bring my own unique understanding, personal history, perceptions, characteristics, skills, culture and experiences to exploring the research question from the teachers' perspective (Maree, 2007). My purpose was to find out what was on the teachers' minds as they

recalled their experiences (Merriam, 1998). Thus my task was to ask questions using the chosen research methods to obtain rich in-depth information about their understanding and experience of learning support.

As the researcher, I was the “primary instrument” of this study, with my own world views, values, perspectives and experiences (Merriam, 1998, p.22). Together with these, I needed to maintain a broad “tolerance of ambiguity” throughout the research process (Merriam, 1998, p.20). I thus needed to incorporate my own construction of reality and the phenomenon under investigation in my research. I needed to show “sensitivity, or be intuitive”, clear and fundamental requirements which have an impact when gathering information (Merriam, 1998, p.22). I had to be a “good communicator” and be able to listen with skill, communicate with “warmth and empathy”, and if I hoped to build trust and establish rapport (Merriam, 1998, p.20). However, even though, as an interpretive researcher, I valued the interaction during the process, I nevertheless had to be aware of boundaries, personal histories, gender issues, social class, race, practices and professionalism. I was therefore involved in an interactive way with exploring the teachers’ understanding and experiences of learning support in the classroom.

I strove to respond by questioning which called for clarification and by checking for accuracy and unusual responses during the interviews (Merriam, 2002). Simultaneously, I used more probing questions when exploring the detailed descriptions of the teachers’ experiences in real-life settings (Merriam, 1998) from the participants’ own points of view (Maree, 2007).

In all of the above, I had to maintain respect for the confidentiality. I therefore instructed the participants not to disclose what was discussed during the group interviews (Lambert, 2012).

### **3.5 RESEARCH METHODS**

I selected my research methods with the aim of ensuring coherence between the research design and the research questions. Using multiple methods to explore the phenomenon in question increased the validity of the findings, adding richness and in-depth descriptions and deepening my own understanding (Merriam, 1998). The purpose was to reflect on an individual’s subjective experience, rather than search for objective truth or decide what was “correct” in the responses (Willis, 2007, p.194). Indeed, the extant studies recommend the use of a range of methods, such as focus group interviews, individual semi-structured

interviews, questionnaires and narrative Reflective notes (Ntombela, 2011; Ellins, 2005; Magare et al., 2010; Swart, et al., 2002).

### **3.5.1 Participant selection and selection criteria**

Participant selection or sampling refers to the process whereby the researcher chooses or identifies participants from the larger population studied. The aim is to secure the richest source of information in the shortest time. According to Durrheim and Painter (2006) “design coherence is achieved by matching the sampling and data collection strategies with the unit of analysis” (p.41). For this qualitative exploratory study, I used non-probability or non-random sampling to select a small number of information-rich cases from the larger population of the teachers in the school (Merriam, 2009; Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Such purposive sampling allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants’ experiences (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). In addition, in this study it could provide “information-rich cases” (Merriam, 2002, p.12) from a subset of teachers who were easily identified from a larger population (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Through the sampling process, I selected those secondary school teachers who were pertinent to the study (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). As discussed in chapter one, they were chosen from those teachers at a secondary school in the Cape Winelands who supported learners in their classrooms (Mouton, 2001). The following criteria helped with the careful selection of the participants (Silverman, 2005). The criteria were formulated in order to facilitate the selection of the sample from the larger population of teachers.

- Trained secondary school teachers.
- Non-gender specific.
- Teachers with at least two years’ teaching experience who were willing to share their learning support experiences with learners with diverse learning needs.
- Active involvement in classrooms which included learners with diverse needs.

Table 3.1 on the following page gives biographical data of all the research participants.

**Table 3.1 Biographical data of all the research participants**

PARTICIPANT	AGE	GENDER	QUALIFICATION	TEACHING EXPERIENCE	GRADES TAUGHT	LEARNING AREAS	CAPACITY/ROLE AT SCHOOL
P1	43	F	B.Com, HED	21 Years	Gr 10-12	Accounting Economics EMS	Post level 1 Coordinator-Prefects
P2	45	M	BA HED-Psych	18	Gr 8,12	Afrikaans LO	Post level1 Buyer, Rugby trainer, counsellor
P3	48	M	HED B. Tech-Hons FDE-Accounting	23	Gr 8-12	Science, Geography	Post level 1 Teacher
P4	43	F	HED Spec ACE-Maths	22	Gr 8-12	Sewing & clothing, Maths	Post level1 Netball, staff representative, Coordinator SRC, School functions, Finance
P5	45	F	BSc-HED	14	Gr 8-12	Nat-Science, Life Science, Geography	Post level1 School paper coordinator, Young Einstein's-coordinator RCI
P6	59	F	BA-HED	14	Gr 8-12	Afrikaans, Guidance counselling, History, Geography	Post level 1 reading group
P7	46	M	BA-HED	18	Gr 8-12	Afrikaans, Business studies	Post level 1 Sports coordinator
P8	51	F	BA-HED	31	Gr 8,10-12	English, FAL	Girls' soccer facilitator
P9	39	M	BEd-HED	12	Gr 10-12	Maths	Post level1, Maths subject coordinator, Exam committee, functions committee, soccer coordinator
P10	52	F	BSc-HED	21	Gr 8-12	Natural science, Maths, Physical science	Deputy Principal, Academic coordinator
P11	41	F	HED, BEd-Hons	14	Gr 8-12	Maths, Life orientation	Post level 1
P12	47	F	B.Com-HED, BEd-Hons	24	Gr 8,10-12	Economic management sciences	HOD-Business dep, SBL-Member, IQMS-Coordinator, Intervention head, Grade-Head, Budget/Finance committee member
P13	45	M	B.Com, HED	23	Gr 8-12	Economic Business Sciences, Business Studies, History	Post level 1 Buyer, Supply Issue, Control & Maintenance AV system, Control & Maintenance copy & Computers
P14	34	M	BSc, PGSE	10	Gr 8,10,12	Physical Science, Natural Science, Maths	Post level 1 Sharing coordinator-SRC
P15	44	F	BEd-HED	20	Gr 8-12	English, Mathematics	Post level 1 Teacher
P16	56	M	BA, BA Hons	34	Gr 8-12	Afrikaans home language	Acting Principal, Management, Discipline, finance, coordinate with members
P17	52	M	BA, HED	28	Gr 8-12	English	Head of department, subject head, grade head, registers, discipline
P18	36	M	BEd	11	Gr 8,9	Afrikaans, Creative Arts	Post level 1
P19	25	F	BEd	3	Gr 8-10	Life Orientation, Maths, History	Post level 1
P20	32	F	BEd	8	Gr 8-12	Computer studies	Post level 1

The twenty participants consisted of teachers of which eleven are female and nine are male. Their teaching experience ranged from three years to thirty four years and teaching in various learning areas. Furthermore, the teachers fulfilled various additional roles in the school. For a detailed discussion of the participants refer to section 3.5.2.2.

### 3.5.2 Methods of data collection and analysis

Using qualitative methods, I captured data from the participants about their varied experiences. These consisted of direct quotations about their experiences, their knowledge and the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). These allowed me to gain a “deeper” insight, appreciation and understanding of their views, values, understanding and insights into their learning support experiences (Silverman, 2000, p.89). Given the exploratory nature of my research, it was important to apply various methods of collection of data in order to explore their experiences more clearly and deeply (Lambert, 2012). Language is a very important part of data collection and analysis of the qualitative research process. According to Merriam (2009), it is the medium through which participants give rich descriptions of their lived experiences and their understanding of a phenomenon. In this study, participants were invited to take part in an activity, ‘mapping a diverse classroom’. This required them to draw, write and reflect. After the individual questionnaires and narrative Reflective notes were explained, I made appointments to conduct the focus group interviews and individual semi-structured interviews. The table below reviews the specific methods I used to collect data.

#### 3.5.2 Table of data collection process of participants

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION	TYPE OF DATA	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Focus group interviews	Verbal	5
Individual semi-structured interviews	Verbal	2
Written Reflective notes	Written	2
Individual semi-structured questionnaires	Written	11
Activity – mapping a diverse classroom	Pictorial, drawing, verbal	3 (From the 20 participants)
Total number of participating teachers		20

### **3.5.2.1 Procedures**

Permission to conduct the research in the chosen school was requested from the Western Cape Education Department, and was granted by the Western Cape Education Research services (see Addendum A). I then telephoned the school and faxed a letter describing my proposed research (see Addendum B). Once the school principal had been consulted and had consented to the research, I approached the staff members in the school, seeking their written agreement to take part in the research. I explained my motives and my purpose in undertaking the study. I also applied to the Research Ethical Committee (Humanities) in the Department of Research Development at Stellenbosch University and was given permission to conduct the study (Reference number 20131101-19825).

As noted above, the sample consisted of twenty purposefully selected teachers (Merriam, 2002). The data collection methods were chosen to explore and generate similar detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. Thus interview guides and a questionnaire were developed, with similar questions aimed at gathering similar data from the participants. The data collection process allowed for the development of flexible inductive knowledge, offering a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the topic under study (Merriam, 1998). A comfortable, secure and private comfortable room was used to conduct the interviews and carry out the activity.

### **3.5.2.2 Data collection**

Qualitative researchers collect data in order to make sense of the participants' experiences. The focus of this study was on the teachers' real-life situations in the classroom. As a qualitative researcher, I adopted interactive and intersubjective relationships with reality, which meant that data were collected using multiple methods, as previously discussed. This allowed me to learn more about the teachers' experiences of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2002; Kelly, 2006). These different methods are explained in more detail in the following sub-sections.

The following discussions provide a journey or an "audit trail" of the multiple methods used to collect rich in-depth data from the participants (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004, p.104). An audit trail is a detailed account of the multiple methods and procedures used to carry out the data collection (Merriam, 2002). These multiple methods complement each



other and are most suitable. The following is to “argue the logic” (Henning et al., 2005, p.104) and complement coherence of the data collection process. Since I realized that the teachers’ own schedules and responsibilities would influence the process of data gathering, I arranged for all the teachers to meet in the staff room at a time convenient for all. After I discussed the process of informed consent they were presented with a list of the different techniques that I would use to collect data. I also gave out a list in which each participant could indicate which technique of data collection he or she would prefer. Firstly the focus group interviews were done with the participants by appointment. Thereafter the individual semi-structured interviews followed also by appointment with the participants. The questionnaires and narrative reflective notes were handed to the participants and were collected after completion. The activity namely ‘mapping support in our classrooms’ was done as a final exercise. The semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and mapping activity were recorded. For further details refer to the sub sections below.

- **Focus group interviews**

A focus group interview involves a small group of participants interviewed about a specific topic about which there is a paucity of information and a minimum of available funding for study (Patton, 1987). Findings from such studies are not generalized to larger samples (Walden, 2012). In this project, I engaged with a relatively homogeneous group of people who were asked to reflect on open-ended questions during interviewing for more or less ninety minutes.

This group consisted of five teachers who were interviewed for half an hour during school hours, after learners had completed an exam session. The discussions were conducted in a quiet room in the school. Importantly, since this was an exploration of a specific phenomenon, an interview format was used, rather than a discussion or problem-solving approach. In spite of my personal experience of the teachers’ personal testimonies, only a small group was deemed necessary to stimulate “real” conversation, working with “friend groups”, rather than with “strangers” (Walden, 2012, p.57). The teachers shared a common interest, that of supporting learners in the classroom. Although focus group interviewing is socially constructed, with characteristics relevant to the purpose of the study, the participants might not have felt free to talk about their experiences in the presence of colleagues.

As this was an exploratory research, interviewing participants in a group meant that new thoughts and information could surface (Lambert, 2012). Focus group interviewing is a flexible method in which prompting allows for with deeper and fuller discussion and triggers new understanding and ideas (Walden, 2012). In this study, however, I did not set out to discover “how participants relate and interact with each other in a specific situation” but rather to describe, communicate and make meaning of their unique experiences (Maree, 2007, p.75). In addition, the focus group gave “high-quality data in a social context where teachers can consider their own views in context of the views of others” (Merriam, 2009, p.94). Although the participants heard each other’s responses, they were neither expected to reach consensus nor was it necessary for them to disagree (Walden, 2012). Such focus groups allow for participant involvement, in-depth questioning and ready access to content. I carried out the interviews using an interview guide which allowed the participants to verbalize their own insights and their experiences of learning support (Patton, 2002) (Addendum F – General interview guide focus group).

- **Individual semi-structured interviews with participants**

In-depth semi-structured interviews can be defined as “repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on learning support, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words” (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990, p. 79). I interviewed two participants in a room suggested by the staff. The interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

The individual semi-structured interviews were especially relevant, since I had never personally observed the teachers in their classroom context, either in the past or the present (Merriam, 2009). An interview is “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (Merriam, 2009, p.88). In this study, a subject’s experiences would unfold from his or her own perspective, and not from my perspective as the researcher conducting the interviews. I saw interviewing as way to establish how the teachers understood their learning support experiences by creating an environment of openness. The aim was to gather a specific kind of knowledge from the two participants, offering opportunities for rich description. During the interviews, it was essential to create an atmosphere of respect for the participants’ responses, seeing them as

valuable and useful, remaining non-judgemental and non-threatening when they shared their experiences with me (Merriam, 2009). This reinforced the importance of using good listening skills, carefully formulated questions, and probing in a familiar language (Merriam, 2002).

During the interviews, I used an interview guide with flexible but probing open-ended questions (Merriam, 2009). The goal with the open and flexible method was to explore the teachers' insights and encourage them to talk freely in a way which "may lead to insight and comprehension" (Patton, 2002, p.111). This allowed me to respond to relevant and new information as it emerged from the interview (Merriam, 2009). Addendum G shows the general interview guide which was formulated to facilitate the individual semi-structured interviews.

- **Individual questionnaires**

A questionnaire comprises a combination of open and/or closed questions, designed by the researcher. Eleven teachers volunteered to respond to the questionnaire, which involved writing sentences. The same room as for the previous discussions and interviews was made available. Here the participants could all sit and complete the questionnaires. This allowed them to ask when any uncertainties arose from the questions, saving time. The arrangement might hinder them from completing their questionnaire, but would not hold up the process entirely. Twenty minutes was allocated to complete the questionnaire.

Having established a good rapport with the eleven participants (Robson, 2002), I presented the questionnaire to them (Lambert, 2012). The questions were read through with the four participants, with time allowed for any queries. Since the aim of the questionnaire was to allow them to think about their responses in their own time, it was only collected the following week. In addition, I helped them by using prompts relevant to the written questions (Robson, 2002). See Addendum I for the questions in the individual questionnaires.

- **Narrative reflective notes**

Reflective notes is a way of collecting data and gaining insights into participants' experiences using open-ended questions in order to gain insight into their world (Patton, 2002). Two teachers were willing to give narrative accounts of their work in learning support in the

classroom. In their narratives, they gave voice to their thoughts, interpretations and insights. The open-ended questions assisted them with exploring and sharing their experiences (Patton, 2002) (See an example in Addendum E). These narrative reflections were the teachers' descriptive accounts and recollections of their learning support experiences (Benjamin & Grabtree, 1999).

- **Activity - 'mapping support in our classrooms'**

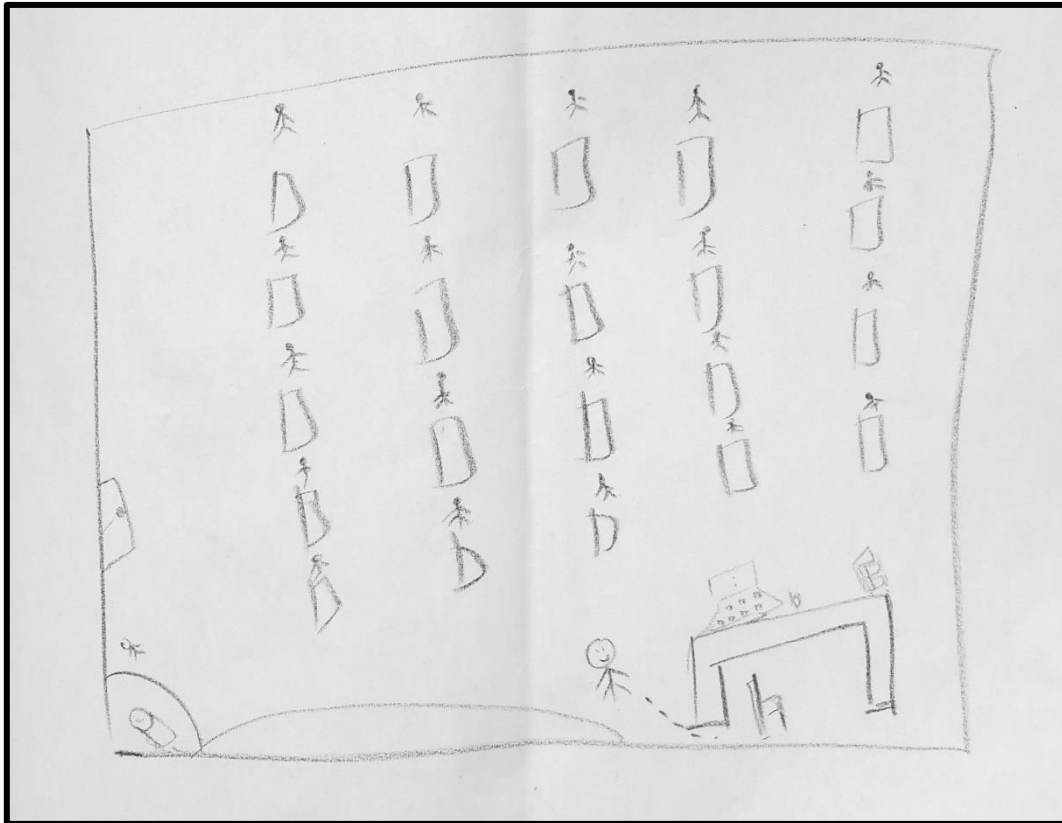
The selected interactive activity, as discussed in chapter one, was appropriate as it placed the teachers centrally in the learning support experience. In addition, it was used as a way to explore, stimulate and recall prior and recent experiences of learning support (Rohleder et al., 2008). The activity, 'mapping support in our classrooms' was used to stimulate information-rich discussions among the teachers. Participation was not compulsory, since it might have put those who were unsure of their ability to draw at a disadvantage.

I explained the aim of the activity to the participants (See addendum H). I called on them to "sketch a map as a map drawn from memory" of their experiences in their classrooms (Van Ommen & Painter, 2005, p. 506). Even though they made a drawing based on their recollection of a typical day in the classroom, the main focus was to reflect on their experiences about offering learning support (Walden, 2012). Photographs were taken of the responses which helped to validate the feedback data, providing a permanent record which I could study in detail as part of the constant comparative analysis (Lambert, 2012). The following three participants, participants 1, 3 and 6, took part in the activity and gave descriptions of their drawings. This activity contributed significantly to the study, since their descriptions of their classrooms added an important dimension to the findings in the sense that it conveyed information regarding support by the teachers in the classrooms.

#### PARTICIPANT 1

The participant completed her drawing of how she experienced classroom support at a table in the staffroom. While doing so, she gave a verbal description of the drawing. She explained that she was not an artist and could only draw stick figures. She was, however, keen to cooperate and approached the task with humour. She drew with precision and accuracy in a focused manner. She used only one colour, a black wax crayon. After she had

completed her picture, she commented: “I drew it this way with the teacher in front of the class and all the children in rows in their desks listening, that’s how I do it, disciplined, maybe that is not the way it should be, maybe not a good thing.”



### PARTICIPANT 3

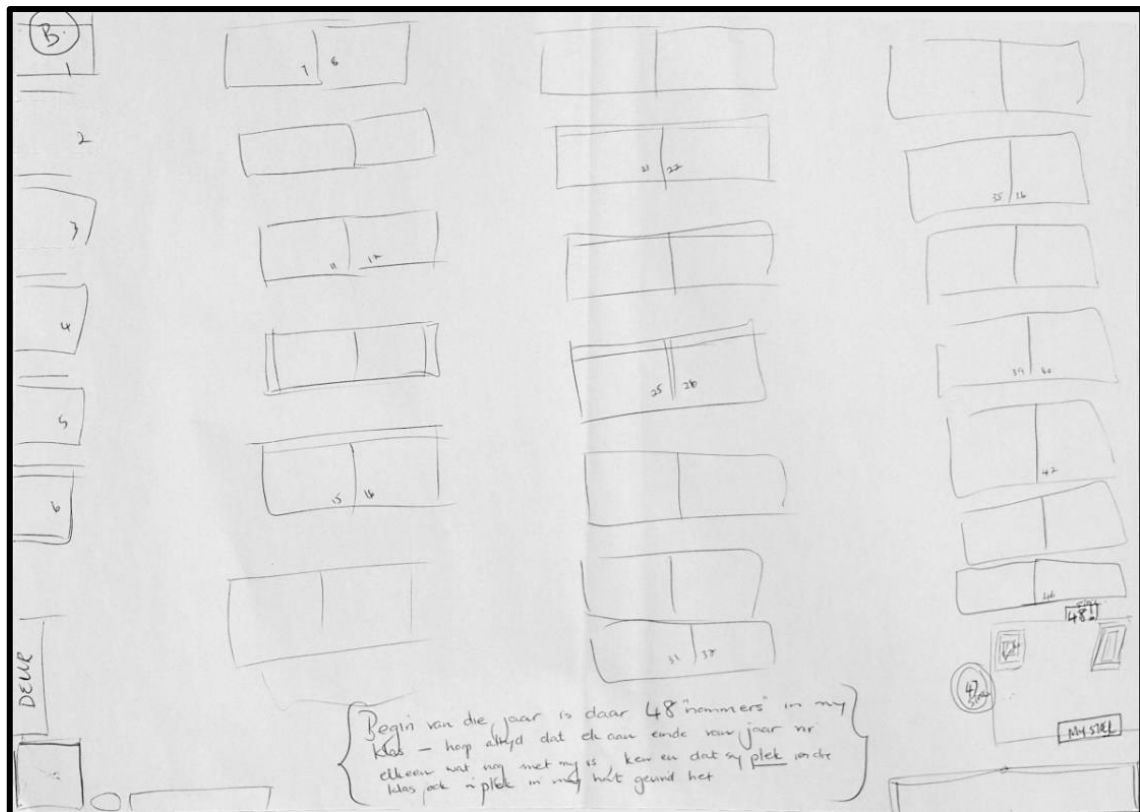
This participant preferred to work separately from the other participants, and went to work in his office. I went back to collect the drawing from him later on the same day. I asked him if he would be willing to share his process with me. He agreed and went on to describe the drawing in detail. He used different colour wax crayons and accompanied the process with the following reflection: “The broken heart represents the learners who so often experience sadness or a broken relationship. As for the house, several learners come from broken homes and long for family support. The face with the one eye open and one closed, indicates a witness to crime and abuse. Drug and alcohol abuse are common in the community, and the ear describes the constant humiliation and criticism which the learners endure. The tree represents the teacher’s classroom. The clock indicates the lack of time and opportunities for effective learning.

“Dark clouds signify difficult times and in contrast the sun is there to shine for everybody. Among the dark clouds there is always the possibility of clear blue skies. The question marks are enquiring about what could become of the learners’ learning and development.”



#### PARTICIPANT 6

This participant claimed that she was not skilful enough to draw, but nevertheless undertook the exercise and completed her drawing. She used her black pen and drew in an artistic way with short lines. While drawing, she told the story of her role in the classroom as if it were a movie playing out on paper. The process seemed effortless and she drew without hesitation.



The following inscription appeared in the picture: “In the beginning of the year, there are 48 numbers in my classroom. I am always hopeful that by the end of the year I will know each one and have a place for each one in my heart. Further, specific markings indicate where learners with challenging behaviour or particular learning problems are seated. The numbers at the desks as well as the placement of desks indicate an overcrowded classroom.”

Once the data had been collected, I set out to verify it (Merriam, 2009). As in most qualitative research, the aim was to explore the participants’ own understanding of their learning support experiences. Working within a constructivist perspective allows the teachers’ to understand their own learning support experiences. In other words “the multiple realities that the teachers have in their minds” to reflect the different perspectives they could have of learning support in the classroom context (Maree, 2007, p.81). The different perspectives of the phenomenon from the teachers’ point of view are described here, rather than a specific type of learning support.

### 3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is the process researchers use to make sense of the data they have collected during the research process. Researchers examine the meaningful content of the data when doing qualitative data analysis where one needs to stay close to one's data to interpret it from a position of empathic understanding as when Terre Blanche et al. (2006) state that a qualitative research perspective implies making the "strange familiar and the familiar strange" (p. 321).

The constant comparative method of analysis is a basic strategy which is well adapted to developing concepts inductively. This is a back and forth movement between what one knows and what one wishes to know, "description and interpretation, foreground and background, part and whole, to achieve a compelling account of the phenomenon being studied" (Terre Blanche et al., 2006, p. 321). I the researcher aimed to stay close enough to context so that people familiar to the context can recognise it as true, but far enough to see the phenomenon in a new perspective (Merriam, 2002; Terre Blanche et al., 2006). As noted previously I applied the constant comparative method of analysis. This method entails steps of familiarisation and immersion, coding into themes, inducing themes, elaboration and interpretation and checking.

#### 3.6.1 Familiarisation and immersion

Interpretive data analysis and in this study using the constant comparative method, indicates the researcher should already have a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon under study. During analysis I immersed myself in the information while working through the interview transcripts (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). By the time I was finished working through the transcripts, which allowed comparisons between the participants' descriptions of their experiences, I knew the data more or less generated various categories and sub-categories.

#### 3.6.2 Coding into themes

During this activity themes are allocated to the data. I read sentence for sentence of the transcribed data identifying themes under consideration. The content might be labelled with more than one code that relate to different themes. Therefore, coding was done manually and the categories were further refined too. As previously noted, the strategy was



inductive in order to analyse the data into key themes (Merriam, 2002; Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

### **3.6.3 Inducing themes**

The constant comparative method was used to construct themes. Inducing themes is working out what are the organising principles that are in accord with the purpose of the study and the participants' description to their experiences (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The constant comparative method involves continually comparing the themes and categories. The categories were refined and became fewer in number as the participants' experiences were compared (Merriam, 2002). Thus the data was broken down or divided into smaller sub-categories. The next level of analysis involved constructing categories or themes which represented recurring patterns across the data. The themes, sub-themes and categories were inductively inferred from the data. The categories were further refined to. These descriptions or units of data consisted of potentially meaningful data. The data could be as small as a word or as large as a paragraph in describing a teacher's experiences (Merriam, 1998). With the final part of the activity, the themes were isolated and placed into collective patterns because they were repeated in each of the data-gathering processes.

For an example of this process, refer to the excerpt of raw data which is included in Addendum J.

### **3.6.4 Elaboration**

Elaboration refers to discovering themes more closely by going over the data and transcripts several times. Further, to be open to the possibility that new themes may emerge which will revise the coding system. The purpose is to keep working through the data in order to give a good interpretation of the teachers' experiences of learning support in the classroom. In other words to, "capture the finer nuances of meaning" (Terre Blanche et al., 2006, p. 326). During this process I read closely and was open to new themes from the data.

### **3.6.5 Interpretation and checking**

The final step was putting together the interpretation of the findings. This was possible when I felt comfortable with the resulting themes, categories and sub-categories.

### **3.7 Validity and reliability**

As a qualitative researcher I have to be sure of how I explain a phenomenon, thus establish the validity and reliability of finding from the study. A short discussion explaining what validity and reliability are in qualitative research is followed with the strategies used.

Reliability according to interpretive and constructivist researchers do not assume that results will be repeatedly the same (Durrheim, 2006).

Validity is described by Durrheim and Painter (2006) as the degree to which your conclusions are true. However, internal validity is important for qualitative research. Internal validity in qualitative research is concerned with understanding the perspectives of the participant who were involved in the research. As noted by Merriam (1998), the question is “do the findings capture what is really there?” (p.201). Furthermore, internal validity is interested in describing their experiences in context and “present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, 2002, p. 25).

The following strategies namely triangulation, peer review/examination, adequate engagement in the data collection, audit trail and researcher’s bias were applied in this qualitative research to promote the validity of the study. A concise discussion follows giving a clear description of each strategy.

#### **3.7.1 Triangulation**

According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006), triangulation allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon under study. This was done by looking at the data from different sides in order to gain a clearer understanding of the teachers’ experiences. Various methods of data collection was used, namely focus group interviewing, individual semi-structured interviews, individual questionnaires, narrative Reflective notes and an activity named ‘mapping support in our classrooms’

#### **3.7.2 Peer review/examination**

Discussions with my supervisor and colleagues to comment on the findings assisted with interpretations which provided extremely valuable and helped with validity (Merriam, 1998).

### **3.7.3 Adequate engagement in data collection**

It is important that the researcher spends sufficient time working through the data. Working through the data until “saturated” (Merriam, 2002, p. 26) means reading until no new information emerges in themes and categories. In this study interviews and questioning was done until similar information was collected from the participants. Thereafter, the process of analysis was performed until there no new themes and categories were repeated.

### **3.7.4 Audit trail**

As previously discussed in section 3.5.2.2, the audit trail included the explanation of the methods used in the study, which is a significant strategy used to increase the study’s reliability (Merriam, 2002).

### **3.7.5 Researcher’s bias**

I had to be aware of my assumptions, experiences, understanding and worldview of the phenomenon under study. As noted in chapter one, this study originated from my interest and field of expertise, thus I was constantly aware of my own perceptions regarding learning support (Merriam, 1998).

## **3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Qualitative research involves interaction among individuals. Accordingly, I needed to build a rapport with the teachers. When participants share their personal experiences and understanding with the researcher, a trusting relationship can be established (Tindal, 1996, as cited in Lichtman, 2013). However, developing such a rapport and trusting relationship can bring with it ethical challenges.

Any research dealing with people must be guided by ethical principles. I applied for permission from the Western Cape Education Department to conduct research in the particular school chosen (Addendum A), after which the school was contacted and permission obtained from the principal. The study was given ethical clearance at Stellenbosch University, and approval was granted to carry it out (Addendum C, D). Equally important, the participants were informed of their rights.

Ethics are an important factor in the research process, particularly when it involves individuals with their own meanings, beliefs, understandings and opinions. After approval was granted on an institutional level, it was necessary to secure the teacher's informed consent, voluntary participation, autonomy and confidentiality. With these assurances, they would be more willing to be honest and speak freely (Lambert, 2012, p. 141).

Informed consent means being committed to preserving the participants' anonymity. They also have the right to be informed about the nature of the group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews and the dynamics in which they will be involved (Allan, 2011). Voluntary participation requires the participants to have an appropriate respect for human freedom (Merriam, 2002). Autonomy means that individuals have the right to make their own decisions about what is important and to live by their declared values (Allan, 2011). However, the teachers' might be able to identify their colleague's responses so anonymity cannot be assured. In conclusion, confidentiality ensures the participants' anonymity, protecting them against the unwanted exposure of personal data and opinions. In this study, therefore, all the data had to be secured, both to protect the participants' identities and to prevent any harm or embarrassment to them.

### **3.9 SUMMARY**

In this chapter, I focused on discussing the research paradigm and methodology. I described the research design and how I would use it to answer the questions of the study. In addition, the ethical considerations and issues of data verification were discussed. I present the findings in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

“We are not the sources of problems. We are the resources  
that are needed to solve them. We are not expenses,  
we are investments” (Peters, 2007, p.98).

These were the words of Gabriela Arrieta of Bolivia and Audrey Cheynut of Monaco, in their opening address at the United Nations Special Session on Children, May 2002. Would it not be beneficial to focus on the teachers as resources of learning support? They are skilled, resourceful human beings with beliefs, attitudes, perspectives and the willingness to share. It will never be possible to realize the goal of Education for All (1995) if we do not begin by implementing learning support in the classroom.

The classroom is the nucleus and the teacher is an agent for change. By drawing on teachers' experiences of learning support, I believed that I would come to know and understand the process from their point of view (For the ontology and epistemology of this study, refer to section 3.2). I was confident that our teachers were capable, willing and dedicated to their calling.

#### **4.3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THEMES**

I will present the findings from my research according to the themes and categories which emerged during the constant comparison analysis (See table 4.3). Three themes and relevant categories developed from an inductive interactive process. During this, I looked for similarities according to a set of themes and categories relating to the topic of the study (Maree, 2007). These themes and categories corresponded with the participants' comments recorded during the focus group interviews, individual semi-structured interviews, narrative Reflective notes and individual questionnaires. Inclusion and exclusion were carried out according to criteria relevant to the teachers' own experiences of support and the influence of other systems on their functioning in the classroom. These themes and categories reflected the participants' most relevant characteristics in relation to their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The following table gives an overview of the themes

and categories which came from the analysis of the research data and a framework from the literature research.

**Table 4.2: Themes and categories from the research data**

THEMES	CATEGORIES	Connection with theoretical framework
Beliefs about learning support	<b>Person characteristics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Demand Characteristics</b> Age, gender, race, appearance</li> <li>• <b>Resource Characteristics</b> Past experiences, skills, intelligence, social-, material resources</li> <li>• <b>Force Characteristics</b> Attitudes/beliefs, Opinions, Perceptions, Responsible, Awareness, Mindfulness, Moral, support, Conscientious, Empathetic, Responsive, Mediator</li> </ul>	Opinions, Perceptions, Awareness/mindfulness, Responsible, Conscientious, Empathy, Caring, Value discipline, Responsive, Dedication, Interest, Self-esteem, Self-efficacy, Self-concept, Personal Knowledge.
Challenges when supporting learners	<b>Political:</b> Changes in the political and economic climate in the country, diversity in inclusive classrooms, too many changes in educational policies and the curriculum.  <b>Social justice:</b> Feelings of incompetence high rate of teacher attrition, unsafe school environments, unsatisfactory working conditions, the need to achieve high pass rates, poor teacher morale, unprofessional conduct of some teachers, lack of accountability, lack of parent involvement, difficulty of community involvement.  <b>Equity:</b> Filling of affirmative action posts and a lack of resources, increased roles of teachers as a result of too much administrative work, , declining quality of education due to internal promotion practices, lack of co-ordinated workshops, poor management and leadership in schools.	<b>Context</b>
Learning support	Strategies, activities, content, identify, assess, resources, development, implementation, diverse needs, collaboration, diversity, adaptability, differentiation of work.	<b>Process and time:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Micro-time</b></li> <li>• <b>Meso-time</b></li> <li>• <b>Macro-time</b></li> </ul>

The following section gives a detailed report of the themes and categories, discusses the participants' understanding of the phenomenon, and includes selected detailed descriptions, which can be related to figure 4.1, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework.

#### **4.3.1 Introduction of themes**

The aim of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to explore a field of interest, in which little research has been conducted, in the secondary school context. I explored and describe teachers' understanding of learning support in diverse classrooms. This chapter presents and discusses the themes and categories that I constructed from the data.

##### ***4.3.1.1 Teachers' beliefs about learning support***

A significant aspect of teachers is their beliefs, which can be "defined broadly as tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (Kagan, 1992, p.65). See table 4.2 for the criteria used for constructing themes and categories.

Importantly, although all the participants were exposed to similar questions, each teacher responded according to his or her own personal knowledge, experiences and understanding. It was a challenge to explore the participants' attitudes and beliefs, since their initial responses were broad and not detailed. However, to gain precision I used probes such as 'Tell me more, what do you mean, when was it more obvious? What else did you do? What was your understanding?'

The teachers seemed to share a belief system which included various aspects of support for learners with diverse needs in the classroom at secondary level. Teachers felt that giving learners personal attention by sitting next to them helping with work is a way of learning support. They had specific beliefs about ways of mediating knowledge to their learners. This they felt was possible by creating a buddy-system can improve learning relationships. They relied both on these beliefs and on their practical experiences with different grades and participants. The following comments, transcribed from one participant, reflect one of their beliefs about the different expectations for different participants.

*"In your subject area it might be different with maths..." "Look, reading is now naturally important, we with the languages have it much easier than the other; there is a lot of oral and discussion ..."*

They shared reservations about classroom resources, management and the impact of the ratio of learners per teacher. Such experiences created feelings of negativity, powerlessness and a lack of self-efficacy in the teachers. Here below is an extract of one participant's statement. Two of the participants explained their feelings about working in overcrowded classes:

*"I think our biggest problem today is that there are too many children in the class. We are at the moment busy with, uh, crowd control, crowd control is what we are busy with, just controlling the mass that is what we mean... and ...the extra that is done is not appreciated and they are not motivated to do more."*

From participant 3's (p. 70) representation of 'mapping support in the classroom', it was clear that the teacher has the ability to put himself in the learners' shoes and display empathetic understanding for learners diverse needs.

Their self-efficacy was affected by their belief about their own ability to support learners in the classroom (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Bandura, 1977; Gibson & Dembo, 1984, as cited in Kagan, 1992). Those who had a positive sense of self-efficacy tended to be task-orientated and enthusiastic, even while being aware of the many challenges they faced in diverse classrooms. The following is an excerpt from a teacher who shared a positive sense of self-efficacy:

*"...You must know your work, that is basically important, you must be adaptable that is a basic skill that you must have, where there is 24, 25 to 30 children in the classroom where they don't have the same way of working, one must try different aspects, bringing it into the classroom at different times..."*

Teachers who felt they could make a difference tended to take responsibility and were willing to go beyond what was expected of them by relying on their knowledge and their own experiences and beliefs. The following description reflects how one participant relied



on self-efficacy, positive attitude, beliefs and knowledge, all of which are important personal characteristics needed for the teacher giving support in the classroom.

*“If you look at skills of teachers in the secondary school then they all have skills, every teacher that is qualified has enough skills to help the children. But what the teachers need is the support and if that is there, then it means it makes the work so much easier and for the teacher to say I am going to school today and he goes into the classroom to present the lesson and he gives extra...”*

*“I am patient; they will sometimes even come and ask about other participants, so sometime we must just be patient...”*

In short, teachers are involved from day to day with handling a range of learning situations in which they must depend on their own beliefs. They can also benefit by fostering a climate of sharing their strengths and collaborating with their colleagues in a culture of support. However, the number of learners in secondary schools in need of support has increased, so the schools often lack the resources needed to support the teachers themselves (Nel, Müller, Hugo, Helldin, Bäckmann, Dwyer & Skarlind, 2011). Under these constraints and faced with various challenges, what can teachers do to support the learners with diverse needs?

#### **4.3.1.2 Teachers' challenges**

Challenges, according to the Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus (Allen, 2007), are “tasks or activities that are new and exciting but can be difficult” (p.106). Secondary school teachers work in overcrowded classes where their learners have diverse needs. These learners need support and for this the teacher is responsible. Not surprisingly, teaching is recognized as one of the most important and also demanding occupations. Notably, those working in mainstream classrooms, especially, are constantly faced with various challenges, as discussed in chapter two. The participants said:

*“...would be about getting parents to be more involved with schoolwork specifically...”*

*"...we have a wide range of differences, so it is there because it is part of the community. That what is in the class is a reflection of what is in the community and diversity is big..."*

*"Another thing that I would also focus on is the parents..."*

*"It is important, seeing that we have so many problems and the parents of our children, they are not in a position to help the children..."*

*"...a further problem is many of the parents work long hours, get home, then the mother and father are too tired, they do not have time to attend..."*

*"That is probably one of our biggest problems, the fact that we don't have the participation of the community..."*

Summing up the teachers challenges indicate that support from the community plays a significant part to in their children's learning. Thus, learners need the recognition and close relationships with their parents for successful learning.

It is clear from the above, and given the various challenges which are evident, that teachers are part of an interrelated network of systems and subsystems which have an impact on support and learning for both them and their learners. Teachers, learners alike have to contend with challenging environments involving socio-economic barriers and lack of parental involvement.

The following comments from the participants shift the focus to how teachers perceive the challenges of supporting learners with diverse needs:

*"I often feel demotivated and I think I have worked this term..."*

*"...your hands feel chopped off, but I pacify myself and say if I have at least reached 3 or 4 children. One can actually pacify yourself by saying at least I did my work and then you feel guilty and think maybe I should have done more, but we have only got so much time available and that is actually to the detriment."*

*"If you look at skills of teachers in the high school, then they all have skills. Every teacher that is qualified has enough skills to help the children, but what the teachers need is the support..."*

Change has been challenging for teachers. Often the focus is on what they cannot or do not do. However, change without support can reinforce feelings of hopelessness, job dissatisfaction and increase those feelings of negativity which demotivate the teachers. Their work involves high stress and emotional challenges. The participants in this study saw their own knowledge as being inadequate, feeling that they lacked the skills and training to implement the necessary structures. In contrast, those teachers who experience support and understanding from significant others find their usefulness and resilience enhanced. The following quotation reflects the participants' perception of the value of support for teachers:

*"...sometimes I stand in front of my class and think I actually mean nothing. But someone told me, if you are going to save only one child then it is already enough. Sometimes the challenge is really to stand in front of the class and feel you really mean something. So for me the challenges are extremely big..."*

*"...So I don't have the knowledge..."*

Both teachers and learners have had to adjust to new curriculums and the demands of inclusive classrooms. Shortage of time is a constant threat for all teachers, placing extra pressure on them to complete the work and support all their learners' needs. Implementing a new policy is not simple, since it means taking into account diversity and the individual values and beliefs of the people who are involved. These barriers seem to create challenges for the teachers in their effort to support their learners. The participant said the following:

*"...the question is, have the teachers had the opportunity to adapt what is the effect on the learners that there is continuous new curriculums, so what is the effectiveness of training then"*

*"...we tend not to ask, that is our problem we are not willing to go out there and ask, so then we are actually stuck with work that is not necessary. We must be able to delegate, we ask too little and we don't change..."*

Adapting to change and implementing the new policies in education have not been without challenges, even for the most competent and dedicated teachers in mainstream classrooms. They often feel disempowered and not recognized. Many are keen on having additional training programmes and support; in the meantime, however, they face difficulties with supporting learners in their classrooms. In the discussion on the teachers' feelings about continuous professional development and training, the participants responded with:

*"Sorry, the workshops, they have their positive outcomes. As I said, I don't want to say negative things, but when you come back and give back here, and then unfortunately it does not happen and in the practice does not click with each other..."*

*"If we go now and we have CAPS and then suddenly it changes to CAPPIES and HEMPIES, I don't know what next they are going to change. It has influences on us as teachers"*

*"...your primary task is the child in the class academically, but the whole child must develop..."*

*"Now I feel for instance the people right at the top are the people that want to apply these things. I wonder by myself, I want to talk to those people, now look at the lot of ladders and steps to get to the top, to get to my principal and then to get to the area manager and then at provincial level. So I don't know if it really is possible to change. Look, I feel us as a teacher, we must tell them that what you at the top do, it does not work at the bottom, and it unfortunately does not work at the bottom".*

Despite these criticisms, they have to make sense of their day-to-day challenges in the classroom. These can vary as they look for new ways of handling their responsibilities and roles (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart & Eloff, 2003). However, the participants agreed that:

*"...there are many new things that the teachers must attend to. How can I put it, their motivation (moral) is very low and constantly they are bombarded with negative things. That is why they neglect their work, and they can't do what they have to..."*

*"...in the class the situation is just as difficult, seeing that we have such larger*

*"I think our biggest problem today is that there are too many children in the class..."*

*"...there is too little time and the syllabus is loaded..."*

*"...departmental expectations itself..." "...we cannot get to everybody..."*

*"...how can we effectively teach?" "We cannot see to all the learners' needs"*

*"...I often feel demotivated, and I think I have worked this term..."*

*"Yes, we have a wide range of differences; it is there because it is part of the community. That what is in the class, is a reflection of what is in the community. Diversity is big..."*

*"...Our children don't have computers at home..."*

*"...I told parents that if you could spend money on one newspaper (Burger) then you have reading material..."*

It can be seen from the participants' descriptions of their experiences that, even though they aimed to create optimal support in the classroom, they struggled with learners with diverse needs which they felt were beyond their area of expertise. In addition, the classes were overcrowded and the teachers felt isolated and without support. While collaboration or sharing of expertise presented a challenge, several of the teachers acknowledged the need to share their skills and experiences.

In conclusion, considering all the challenges they face, it is not surprising that teachers often lack both the facilities and the skills to help learners with diverse needs. It seems that supporting such learners places additional demands on teachers, which in turn impact on the process of interactive learning support (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). The next section looks at what teachers can do to support learners with diverse needs in the classroom.

#### **4.3.1.3 Learning support**

Given the current high-profile debate on inclusive education, with its demand that "quality education should be provided through effective teaching and the necessary support", teachers are being called on to play various roles in the learning support process (Landsberg,

2011, p.75). They have had to change their style of teaching in general secondary schools “from transferring knowledge to learner-centred teaching”, as well as including learners with diverse learning needs (Landsberg, 2011, p.75).

According to Dyson, “inclusive education is a complex, multidimensional and problematic concept and one that resists a universally-accepted definition” (Dyson, 2008, as cited in Swart & Oswald, 2008, p.92). Although inclusive education means different things in different contexts, there are some commonalities. These include a commitment to building a more just society and an equitable education system. Extending the responsiveness of mainstream schools to learner diversity offers a hope of turning these commitments into reality. As a result, ‘learning support’ could best be defined as an attitude or philosophy through which all learners receive the support of dedicated, caring teachers who “make provision for every learner to succeed” (Landsberg, 2011, p.75).

The teachers said that a basic skill for teachers in learning support is to be adaptable. You have to be selective when using different strategies and methods. This could be changing your way of working, when and where and how much to support in the classroom. As the teachers said:

*“I introduced the learning support classes which was for the whole grade group, we look at things such as crossword puzzles because you want you learners to read which help the children to read which is also a way of doing it I helps the children with mind mapping...”*

*“...You must know your work, that is basically important, you must be adaptable that is a basic skill that you must have, where there is 24, 25 to 30 children in the classroom where they don’t have the same way of working, one must try different aspects, bringing it into the classroom at different times it is for instance too much to fit such a variety of skills in one period. So sometimes you just do it in one way. Copy from the board, there is no skill involved with that, so you make sure that all the children have the work, then the next time they come in again then you can apply a skill, then play a video for the children, then it reaches another group of learners. If you give those games then it reaches another group of learners, not all in one period*

*and I started to work like that in a term and then use all the skills that I can apply to include all the learners...”*

*“...yes there are many skills involved that we must apply to help the children, I think the one is we must look at the children’s background what are their problems, their home circumstances that is what I do. Then I will see what I can do for some of their learning problems which get my attention, and then I give them intense assistance if the child needs it...”*

The teachers further said that support is not just what happens in the classroom, they realise the parents’ and environmental challenges have an effect on learning support. As teachers said:

*“...why learning support is important for me, our children don’t have at home, they don’t have computers at home and not in my subject field, they do have computer technology and textbooks but they don’t have basic reading materials at home, so we have to teach them that learning can also go out there, I told parents that if you could spend money on one newspaper (Burger) then you have reading material for two months...”*

*“...so that is important to say to the children but also to the parents they must prepare themselves for what they can do at home and we must teach them what we can because they don’t have at home...”*

*“...so if we can get people from out the community to facilitate us...”*

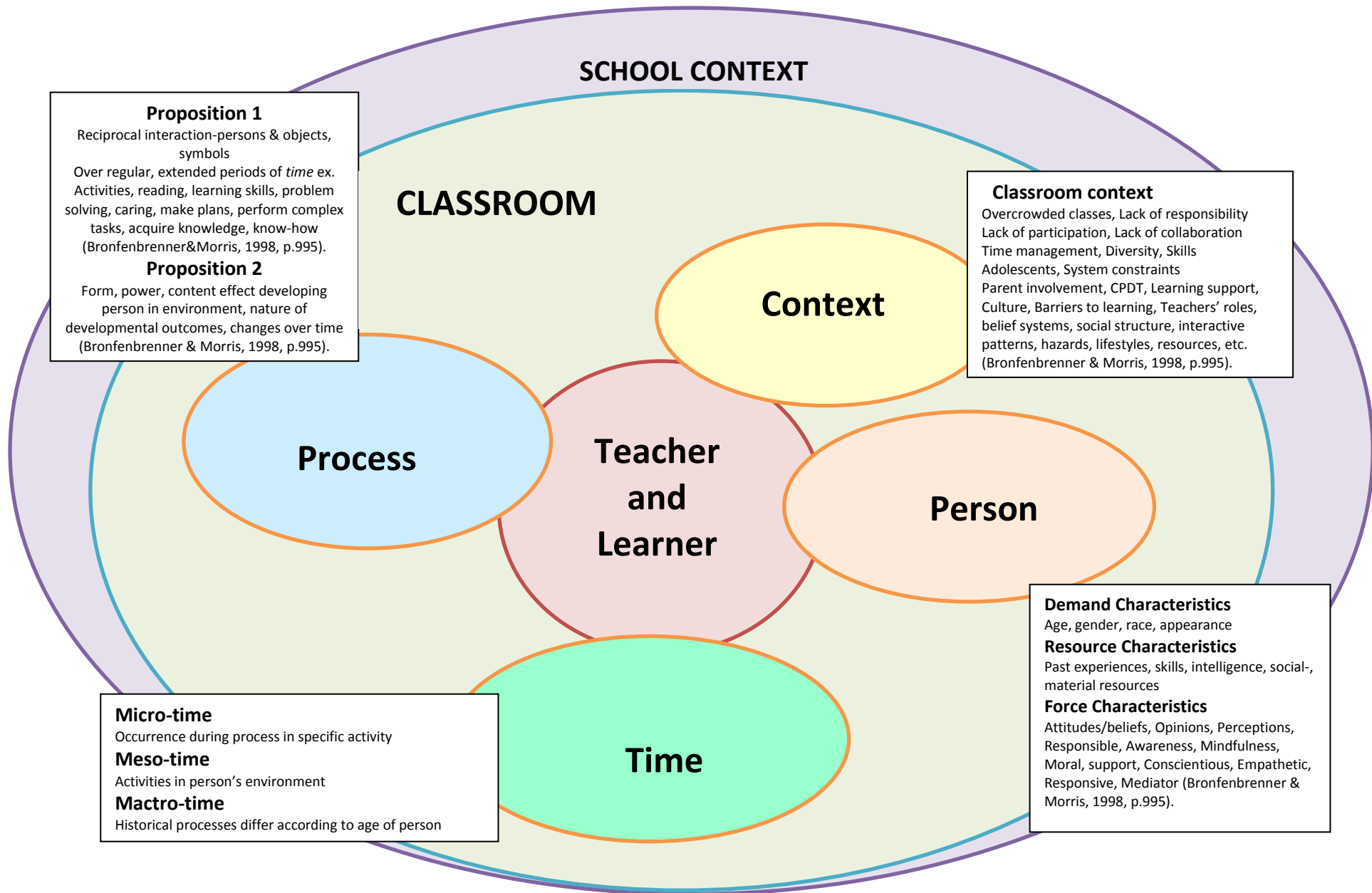
In conclusion, teachers in secondary schools seem capable to experience their learners’ needs despite the challenges mentioned as well as them admitting to their lack of skills and training and understanding of what learning support entails.

Following is a Summary of the Person Process Context Time (PPCT), based on Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model. This representation includes the Person, Process, context and time concepts that play a role in the interactive learning relationships between the teachers and learners during learning support. According to Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) these proximal processes are “particular forms of interaction between organism and

environmental influences that operate over time and are posited as the primary mechanisms producing development” (p.994). Importantly, these interactive learning relationships cannot develop effectively without acknowledging the teacher as a person with their own characteristics and environment influences. The different systems are always present as represented in figure 2.1 (p.34), however, figure 4.1 places the emphasis of the school and more so the classroom context with teacher and learner as centre of the learning support process. The (PPCT) representation based on Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model on the following page, places the teacher and learner in the classroom at the centre of the (PPCT) model (Tudge et al., 2009).



**Figure 4.1 Summary of the Person Process Context Time (PPCT), based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model.**



#### **4.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The teachers' summaries of their experiences in their own words provided me with a background to their own understanding of the phenomenon under exploration. Even though the responses were all from teachers in one school, I found various ways to stimulate their participation in the larger discussion and encouraged them to address the general research questions. As noted before, they were free to choose the type of information gathering method with which they would feel most comfortable.

The research question that guided this study was, 'How do secondary school teachers experience learning support?' and the research sub-questions were, 'What does learning support involve for the secondary school teachers?' 'How do teachers support learners with diverse needs in secondary schools?' and 'What do they perceive they need to support learners with diverse needs in the classroom?'

In exploring these questions, I hoped to find out from the participants how they believed supporting their learners contributed to their development of learning support in the classroom.

It seems the teachers contributed in various ways in their roles as supporters. They indicated their commitment to helping learners, including those who had diverse needs. They admitted that they faced various challenges, but nevertheless attempted to deliver the required curriculum. In essence, they further recognize their responsibility to support all their learners, to empower them and help them reach their full potential for success. Their understanding, however, of what learning support actually entailed lacked a clear, detailed explanation. They were especially aware of their own lack of the skills and attitudes needed to deal with diverse learning support needs in the classroom (Magare et al., 2010). Although they were in close reciprocal relationships with their learners, they were constantly confronted with challenges in their environment. Their concerns were on multiple levels and seemed to have a negative impact on their subjective experiences as competent teachers.

Thus from the teachers' descriptions of their experiences as noted in previous quotes from participants, they were concerned about their abilities and about fulfilling the expectations

for supporting learners with diverse needs. In addition, they were concerned about their professional growth. As noted by Magare et al. (2010), support requires emotional nurturing, founded on positive, trusting relationships and collaboration between learners and teachers. Among the teachers' major concerns were the environment, resources and social barriers as noted previously; parents' lack of involvement and inability to support, lack of books and influence of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and gang related activities. As research has shown, the involvement of parents is vital for academic learning (Carrington & Elkins, 2002).

Other challenges were structural, including organizational problems and the lack of a system of support. A major challenge was how to accommodate and support learners in overcrowded classrooms. AS one teacher noted *"...time departmental expectations itself, workload the fact that you would like to, your primary task is the child in the class academically..."* and *"...you must remember as an educator you can work against or with the system..."*

Another teacher noted *"...I think our biggest problem today is that there are too many children in the class. We are at the moment busy with uh, crowd control, crowd control is be are busy with just controlling the mass..."*

Nevertheless, the findings showed that, despite all the doubts that the teachers raised, their own strengths and resiliency were evident throughout the investigation. They described their efforts and their support processes, showing an empathetic understanding for the learners' needs. The findings indicated that they were capable and dedicated, but also that it was important that they be heard, as they had a need to voice their concerns.

When the findings were situated within Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework, it was confirmed that the teachers were central to the learners' success, providing support in their learning and developmental process. These proximal processes and teachers' awareness, both intrinsic and extrinsic, are vital to supporting learners in today's challenging contexts.

## 4.5 CONCLUSION

The essence of the discussion in this chapter was to find out how teachers experience learning support. The research question and sub-questions guided the collection of data, and the following conclusions are relevant to the findings. How secondary school teachers implement learning support was the core element of the research. The participants agreed that carrying out such support involved their own learning experiences and that personal interaction with the learners was vital to creating effective learning in diverse classrooms. As Garmon noted, teachers require the “necessary dispositions for success in the inclusive classroom as open-mindedness, self-awareness and reflection,” and a commitment to learning support for all learners (Garmon, 2005, cited in Blecker & Boakes, 2010, p.436). In addition, research has shown that mutual trust and being liked by learners helps secondary school teachers with their own motivation and thus with carrying out effective support in the classroom (Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel & Malinen, 2012).

To compensate for the lack of resources, as noted in teachers quotes, they make use of what is available to them, both in the classroom and the larger environment. Research has shown that their attitudes, beliefs and values are often not the determining factor in effective learning support; rather, the focus should be on finding out how such support can be implemented in a practical way (Savolainen et al., 2012). Teachers feel they need the support of a collaborative interaction with other professionals and teachers, sharing their knowledge on how to help learners with diverse needs. Forlin (1999) confirms that classroom teachers need to work collaboratively with their colleagues and other specialists, to plan, coordinate, and maintain a network of support to address learning difficulties in the classroom.

Chapter 5 will include the final discussion on the recommendations, limitations and strengths of this research. My own reflections as the researcher will conclude the study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS.**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This last chapter covers concluding remarks, recommendations, and limitations, and takes a look at the strengths emerging from the findings of the study. As discussed in section 4.4, I set out to answer specific research questions. To facilitate the goal of this study the bio-ecological framework offered a framework for exploring the teachers' experiences, support needs, strengths and challenges. Against this backdrop I will reflect on the findings and offer recommendations for further action. This will be followed by a review of the limitations and strengths of the study. Finally, I will offer suggestions for future research.

#### **5.2 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The teachers who took part in this research indicated that there were various challenges and concerns they faced in their classrooms, which ranged from despondent learners, lack of parents' involvement and their own workload. In addition, the adolescents were faced with challenges which impacted on their learning and development, including emotional, social and environmental issues. As noted before, teachers have many roles, as mediators of learning and development for learners, as well as in their own learning process in the classroom. In order to fulfil such roles effectively, they engage in relationships with other people, but nevertheless experience challenges from day to day. People have different needs; therefore different challenges call for diverse kinds of learning support. Since teachers are the most important connection to learners, emotional, social, contextual, biological, physical and cognitive challenges all have an impact on the teachers' own personal, professional and cognitive development. These challenges place specific demands on the teachers in the classroom. It could therefore be argued that the classroom teacher has the responsibility to include all learners and provide learning support to those with diverse needs. To achieve this they need to be emotionally, socially and cognitively healthy.

In this study, the focus on the teachers' experiences in the classroom context raised certain challenges and concerns for their learning support process. Despite the fact that their beliefs, understandings and perceptions had an impact on providing effective learning

support, they were dedicated to their profession. My findings showed that the teachers are capable and professional mediators, however, lack the support that is necessary to apply their skills and provide learners with support. Consequently, they as capable professionals themselves could benefit from support. My findings confirmed the importance of such support for teachers. Conversely, a lack of support could have an impact on their attitudes and beliefs and become a challenge when providing effective learning support (Hay et al., 2001).

The findings further showed that teachers working in schools where the community was either indifferent or less supportive of the school and of learning tended to be discouraged, in particular by the lack of parental involvement (D'Amant, 2012). In addition, Carrington and Elkins (2002) noted that teachers have collective understandings and perceptions about learning, and that these can influence the way their approach to learning support develops over time during their teaching careers. The teachers in this study emphasized the benefits of collaborative professional training and development. Moswela (2006) confirms that continuous professional development and training are becoming increasingly essential, especially where the teachers work with learners in diverse contexts.

I hoped to find out from the participants the methods they used to support their learners and how these contributed to successful outcomes. However, there seemed to be a gap in teachers' understanding, matched by an apparent gap in the literature. Accordingly, the findings served to create an awareness of their abilities, needs and development, specifically as these related to supporting secondary school learners. Their experiences in the classroom were critical to the development of the skills they needed to work with adolescent learners.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological approach was discussed in detail in section 2.2. This is relevant to teachers who are involved in reciprocal interactions with learners in the classroom. In this study, these shared reactions or proximal processes between teachers and learners were mediated by the teachers' characteristics in a specific context (Swart & Phetthiphar, 2011). Apart from the teachers' physical presence and their active involvement in the learning process, their individual characteristics of personality, beliefs and understanding influenced the way they supported their learners. The participants were

accommodating and enthusiastic in openly voicing their understanding and in describing both their positive and negative experiences of learning support. This was an important factor in building knowledge, reflecting their need to communicate their experiences.

The following section gives a summary and conclusion, integrating the research problem and findings against the background of the previous discussions. At first, the teachers' interpretations of 'learning support' were vague and varied. In other words, a common thread was not recognized. As to what learning support involved for them, the findings are consistently blurred. Depending on how they supported learners with diverse needs, the findings indicated that the challenges of providing effective learning support could be overwhelming. In addition, even though they were aware of the need to support their learners, they struggled because of their own circumstances, including time constraints, emotional and social difficulties, coupled with inadequate support from the Department and the larger community.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Various recommendations are made on the basis of the findings of the research. They are presented below:

As part of the data collection process, the participants were asked what they needed to help them offer adequate learning support. They made the following suggestions:

- Support from the community was necessary. This, however, needed to be introduced and maintained with consistent management. Due to the fact that there is no institutional-level support team (ILST) to share responsibilities, I recommend that one be established to support the teachers. Specific community leaders could be included, since they are in a position to communicate with the relevant organizational leaders and experts. These are people with insight into the needs of the community, as well as access to the resources available in the area. Thus various responsibilities could be delegated to those with the expertise needed for effective support. These tasks include supporting learners with reading, extracurricular activities, specialist participants, counselling support, and supervision when teachers

have extra duties to perform. Equally important, educational support directed towards the community could benefit the learners.

- In the same way, the ILST needs to communicate with the “district-based support team” about support services, guidance and assistance (Landsberg, 2011, p.70). Such services include contact with non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, psychological services, curriculum support, management support and liaison with government professionals. In this way, teachers could receive assistance with academic work and attend to those learners with diverse needs.
- Teachers’ CPDT is very important in providing learning support in the classroom. Before any workshops, courses or curriculums are presented or implemented, the teachers should be consulted about their needs. A major challenge for them is to support learners in overcrowded classes. While they cannot change the organization, they can benefit from relevant training and collaborative problem-solving. With regular meetings, staff members could share their experiences and collaborate on their strategies, teaching and learning styles. Through these types of collaboration they could reflect on their own teaching practices (Carrington & Elkins, 2002). Since secondary school teachers deal with learners with diverse learning needs, they are required to think creatively about their expectations in both teaching and learning.

All the participants believed that they had a responsibility to all the learners in their classes. This meant that they were committed to adapting and modifying the curriculum, using relevant creative ways to develop a unique approach. To this end, I would recommend the Guidelines for Inclusive Learning Programmes (DoE, 2005), which has useful guidelines for teachers on how to deal with diversity and the teaching of specific participants in the classrooms. Teachers need to embed their values and beliefs and create new possibilities for learning support. In brief, they need to be able to draw on a range of effective strategies, founded on a shared vision of learning support. The following is a concise list of recommended adaptations and a broad range of flexible alternatives recommended from the Guidelines for Inclusive Learning Programmes (DoE, 2005). Section five in the draft of guidelines is significant which includes inclusive strategies for learning, teaching and



assessment. In the document (DoE, 2005), “there are many practical ways in which teachers can adapt the way in which activities and assessment are planned, structured and conducted (p. 98).

Diverse resources are needed for learning support in the classroom (Carrington & Elkins, 2002). With learning resources accessible on the Internet, teachers can be motivated to create meaningful time for research. Resources include books, articles, websites, downloadable teaching materials, worksheets, strategies, and many more.

#### **5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study was limited to and carried out in a single secondary school. Even though qualitative research is often associated with smaller samples, all the teachers on the staff took part in the investigation. Although various data collection methods were introduced and similar questions were part of each technique, each participant assigned his or her name to one method only. Limitation of time is often a problem in the work of teachers. Ideally, each participant should have taken part in all the methods of data collection, which would have increased opportunities for triangulation and added to the confirmability of the findings. Furthermore, while the study focused on their understanding of learning support for their learners, they would have benefitted from support for themselves. Unfortunately, this was not the focus of the current study.

#### **5.5 STRENGTHS**

The explorative nature of the research design and the use of various data collection methods made possible a rich in-depth description of the teachers’ understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Given their challenges in the face of adversity, it was evident that they were in need of support when working in their classrooms. Even though it was not possible to generalize from an explorative study, research indicates that teachers face particular challenges in diverse classrooms. The findings from this study include important insights that could be used as a starting point for further research on “learning support”. Equally important, such information could help the Education Department in further developing a policy around teachers’ support. Since teachers’ views are linked to their behaviour, their teaching methods and their mediation of learning, further research is needed to focus on them and their support for their learners as interactive research

participants. Undeniably, teachers are agents for change. However, recursive patterns and collaborative experiences could enrich and support them in their roles as carers and mediators of knowledge.

Several concerns were raised which the teachers themselves needed to address. Nevertheless, they showed all the characteristics and dispositions of confident, caring teachers, and were able to continue their remarkable work in diverse classrooms. However entitled to effective support and acknowledgment themselves, the study confirmed that they were capable and effective in their roles in the classroom.

## **5.6 RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES**

Building an inclusive education and training system has been challenging for teachers. They have had to deal with changes which have had an impact on the whole profession. Evidently these changes evoke mixed feelings, creating uncertainty and even stress among those who are expected to support learners with diverse needs and implement the changes, since support is multi-levelled and dependent on time and process. Implementing the Education White Paper 6 has confronted teachers with daily challenges. As emphasized throughout this study, such a system of education requires a paradigm shift in how teachers, professionals, administration and education department officials understand, organize and run the educational process. Clearly, there are imbalances which affect the teachers' day-to-day functioning, facing a heavy workload combined with the challenge to their own development. The effectiveness of the education system as a whole depends on the central role of the teachers in the classroom. Supporting them could enhance their own teaching and learning processes, as well as creating a safe and supportive environment for their learners.

Further research needs to be done on the teachers' own needs and how these relate to the provision of effective learning support. Given that this is a very broad concept, such a study would only be a point of departure. It would be premised on the assumption that, if teachers could share their experiences and their need for effective support, they could better face the challenges in the classroom knowing they were not alone. At present, many

teachers feel overwhelmed by the pressure of work and concerned about their lack of knowledge on implementing learning support in the classroom.

Research relating to secondary school teachers should therefore focus on the mental health needs of those giving learning support in classrooms and schools with diverse and challenging/non-challenging environments. These teachers are exposed to varied and complex challenges. Thus it is important to consider what kind of support they themselves will need in order to provide effective support in the classroom. Such research would explore their attitudes and perceptions, including how they understand their own cognitive functioning when supporting learners. The basic question for such research would be: how do teachers think about their own teaching and learning styles when supporting learners?

Finally, research into what teachers already do, their ideas, opinions and the strategies, programmes and interventions that they employ, could offer valuable information. These insights would complement the empirical evidence already gathered from the participants in this study, adding significant information on the phenomenon in question. Research into the learning support practices of teachers could create a further awareness of the importance and effectiveness of the phenomenon we have been investigating.

## **5.7 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Learning support is close to my heart and I believe it has a profound influence on a teacher's day-to-day teaching experiences. I would like to see all teachers successfully mediating learning support in their classrooms. While carrying out this study, I became increasingly aware of the participants as competent and resilient, caring people. However, since they were daily exposed to challenges over and above those of just teaching and learning, they needed to consider their own learning and development. To this end, they are entitled to being heard, supported and empowered.

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# **Addendum A**



Directorate: Research

[Audrey.wyngaard2@pgwc.gov.za](mailto:Audrey.wyngaard2@pgwc.gov.za)

tel: +27 021 467 9272

Fax: 0865902282

Private Bag x9114, Cape Town, 8000

wced.wcape.gov.za

**REFERENCE:** 20131101-19825

**ENQUIRIES:** Dr A T Wyngaard

Mrs Julia Hannah  
PO Box 1828  
Stellenbosch

**Dear Mrs Julia Hannah**

**RESEARCH PROPOSAL: SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNING SUPPORT**

Your application to conduct the above-mentioned research in schools in the Western Cape has been approved subject to the following conditions:

1. Principals, educators and learners are under no obligation to assist you in your investigation.
2. Principals, educators, learners and schools should not be identifiable in any way from the results of the investigation.
3. You make all the arrangements concerning your investigation.
4. Educators' programmes are not to be interrupted.
5. The Study is to be conducted from **07 April 2014 till 27 June 2014**
6. No research can be conducted during the fourth term as schools are preparing and finalizing syllabi for examinations (October to December).
7. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey, please contact Dr A.T Wyngaard at the contact numbers above quoting the reference number?
8. A photocopy of this letter is submitted to the principal where the intended research is to be conducted.
9. Your research will be limited to the list of schools as forwarded to the Western Cape Education Department.
10. A brief summary of the content, findings and recommendations is provided to the Director: Research Services.
11. The Department receives a copy of the completed report/dissertation/thesis addressed to:

**The Director: Research Services  
Western Cape Education Department  
Private Bag X9114  
CAPE TOWN  
8000**

We wish you success in your research.

Kind regards.

Signed: Dr Audrey T Wyngaard

**Directorate: Research**

**DATE: 01 November 2013**

## **Addendum B**



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jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

26 September 2013

Dear Principal

**Request to conduct research study entitled: Secondary school teachers' experiences of learning support**

I am currently registered as a student in the programme Masters of Educational Support (Structured) at Stellenbosch University under the supervision of Prof Estelle Swart. In order to complete my degree, I have to complete a research study and submit a thesis to fulfil the requirements. I am conducting a research study that aims to explore the teachers' experiences of learning support in a regular classroom in the secondary school. This matter is close to my heart, and it seems there is a need for exploring this topic. I would therefore like to request permission to conduct research in your school. This study aims to explore how general education school teachers' support learners in the secondary school classroom. I would therefore like to interview, share and explore teachers' understanding of current and previous support experiences with learners in their class.

Many learners struggle with daily learning tasks, following instructions, language development, emotional and behaviour problems and stay away from school regularly. Teachers play a major role in the learners' education and deal with major challenges on a daily base. The focus of this study is on teachers as they are responsible for effective teaching and learning support.

General education teachers working in a secondary school will be asked to take part in the study. Interviews will be conducted on the school premises by appointment. The intention is not to interfere with the teachers' professional obligations. The information obtained during this study will remain anonymous and will not be used for any other purpose than this study. Confidentiality will at all times be maintained. Participation in the research study also requires participants to be informed about their rights. By giving written and informed consent, participants acknowledge and understand their rights and grant permission that the data may be used to write a final report for the research study.

Once ethical clearance and permission has been obtained from Stellenbosch University, teachers will be invited to take part in the research study. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may withdraw their participation at any time without any consequences for them. The research will be conducted during the second quarter of 2014. The first stage involves the signing of the consent forms in which the project, confidentiality and anonymity will be explained. The participating teachers will be asked to take part in a focus group interviewing, which includes a group activity and using an interview guide to conclude the process. The participants will be interviewed individually using open ended questions. In conclusion, individual participants will be asked to write a narrative piece reflecting on their experiences and understanding of learning support.

Granting access and allowing the teachers to participate in this research study may contribute to the success of the study and is therefore greatly appreciated. Their participation will contribute to a better understanding of teachers' experiences.

I thus would like to ask permission to invite teachers to partake in the study and to make use of the school facilities to conduct the research activities.

Kind Regards

**Ms Julia Hannah**

Postgraduate Student

Department of Educational Psychology

University of Stellenbosch

E-mail: .....

Cell : .....

## **Addendum C**



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Jou kennisvenoot • your knowledge partner

## Approval Notice New Application

25-Apr-2014  
Hannah, Julia JE

**Proposal #: DESC-Hannah/2014**

**Title: Secondary school teachers' understanding of learning support.**

Dear Mrs. Julia Hannah,

Your New Application received on 06-Feb-2014, was reviewed  
Please note the following information about your approved research proposal:

**Proposal Approval Period: 13-Feb-2014 -12-Feb-2015**

Please take note of the general Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

Please remember to use your proposal number (DESC-Hannah/2014) on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research proposal.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Also note that a progress report should be submitted to the Committee before the approval period has expired if a continuation is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki and the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number REC-050411-032.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at 0218089183.

### Included Documents:

REC application form  
Interview guide  
DESC application  
Research proposal\_Hannah  
Informed consent form  
Permission letters

Sincerely,

Clarissa GRAHAM  
REC Coordinator

Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)



## **Addendum D**



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## **STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

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### **Secondary school teachers' understanding of learning support**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Mrs. Julia Hannah, from the Educational Psychology Department at Stellenbosch University. The results obtained will contribute to a Masters Research thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you work in a general education inclusive classroom in a secondary school.

#### **1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe secondary school teachers' experiences of how they support all learners, on various levels in the classroom through investigation of learning support experiences of secondary school classrooms. Moreover, there is an urgent need to develop a clear understanding of what it takes to support secondary school learners.

This kind of knowledge is needed in teacher education to prepare future and current teachers in an inclusive education system and for in-service training and support. I hope to identify and learn about their competencies, beliefs, ideas, attitudes and resilience in the context of their classrooms as well as obstacles in the process. The study is not about the saturated stories about what they do not have and cannot do but their abilities and capabilities regarding learning support in the face of adversity.

#### **2. PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- Listen to a brief explanation of the study, its purpose and aims.
- Complete an Informed Consent form.
- An activity is incorporated during the group discussion. This activity, 'mapping a diverse classroom' is explained in section 1.5 Research Design and Methodology. The activity requires drawing, writing and reflection from the participants.
- Be available to attend a focus group interviewing where questions regarding your experiences of learning support in the classroom will be discussed. The individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviewing will take place at a time that suits

you. The focus group interviews and individual semi-structured interviews should take more or less one hour. It will be conducted at your school or a place that suits you. Lastly, the individual questionnaires and narrative reflective notes information will be made available.

### **3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research.

### **4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

You will potentially gain greater insight into your current working environment. You will also gain greater insight into your own knowledge and understanding about learning support in the secondary school. Awareness will be raised as to and advocate for teachers' inherent capabilities and beliefs to master learning support in adverse contexts which is so often 'taken-for-granted'. Limited studies focus on teachers' experiences and understanding of learning support in inclusive classrooms. Thus, there is a real need for such insight to teachers' own values, strengths, resilience and abilities, which relates to their subjective experiences of learning support.

### **5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

Participants will not be paid for their participation in this study.

### **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of coding procedures that will ensure that all participants remain anonymous throughout the process. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet, with only the researcher having access to it.

Information will only be shared with the supervisor working with the researcher on this study. Interviews will be audio-recorded and the participant has the right to review the recordings. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings that will also be kept in a locked cabinet.

## **7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## **8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Julia Hannah: Principal Investigator or Estelle Swart: Supervisor. Contact numbers: Julia Hannah – ....., ..... and Estelle Swart – ....., estelle@sun.ac.za

## **9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development at Stellenbosch University.

<b>SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE</b>
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The information above was described to me by Mrs Julia Hannah in English and I am command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant or Legal Representative**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

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**Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)**

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**Signature of Participant or Legal Representative**

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**Date**

<b>SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR</b>
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I declare that I explained the information given in this document to \_\_\_\_\_ [name of the participant]. [He/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English and no translator was used.

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**Signature of Investigator**

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**Date**

# **Addendum E**

## SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNING SUPPORT

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the above mentioned research study. Your assistance and time is greatly appreciated, and it is hoped that this study turn can contribute to you experiences of learning support and help to inspire other teachers to share and learn from each other.

As was stated in the consent form provided, all identifying details will be masked and all information collected will be treated confidential. In order to help interpret the data, I request that you please complete the following section *Biographical Information*

Biographical information:

1. Name – \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age/ Naam – \_\_\_\_\_
3. Gender/Geslag – \_\_\_\_\_
4. Qualification/Kwalifikasie – \_\_\_\_\_
5. Number of years teaching experience/Jare onderwyservaring – \_\_\_\_\_
6. Grades and subjects, learning areas taught/Grade, leerareas  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Nature of training (please provide relevant information)/Relevante opleiding  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Position at school (including responsibilities and other roles)/ Posisie by skool (asook verantwoordelikhede en rolle by skool) –

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9. Interest in future training (Optional)/Belangstelling in toekomstige opleiding (opsioneel)-

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## SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNING SUPPORT

### REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE NOTES

In order to gain insight into secondary teachers' experiences of learning support in the secondary school it is necessary to first explore your and understand your role as a secondary school teacher supporting learners in your class. I would therefore appreciate your answering the following question in writing:

*What does learning support involve for you as a secondary school teacher?/ Wat behels leerondersteuning vir jou as hoërskool onderwyser*

Also consider the following in your response/Neem ook die volgende in ag:

- How do you support learners with diverse needs in the classroom?/Hoe ondersteun jy leerders met diverse behoeftes in die klaskamer?
- What do you perceive you need to support learners with diverse needs in the classroom?/Wat is nodig om leerders met diverse behoeftes te ondersteun in die klaskamer?
- What allows/prevents you from supporting learners contributing to their successful learning outcomes?/ Wat bevorder/verhoed jou om leerders te ondersteun wat 'n bydrae lewer tot suksesvolle leeruitkomste?

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# **Addendum F**

# SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING SUPPORT

## General Interview guide - focus group interviewing

### Background information

As taken from narrative reflective notes.

### Grand tour question:

Tell me about your learning support experiences in the secondary school classroom.

### Guiding questions:

#### FINDING OUT WHAT IS HAPPENING ALREADY

- What is your understanding of learning support?
- In an inclusive classroom, how do you support learners with diverse learning needs?
- What support is currently available for learners in secondary schools?

#### FINDING OUT WHAT PARTICIPANTS THINK ABOUT THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF LEARNING SUPPORT

- In your opinion, what skills do secondary school teachers need to support learners effectively?
- What is your view of learners needing support?
- What are the obstacles secondary school teachers' experiences with supporting learners?

- What are the advantages for secondary school teachers' to support learners in their classroom?
- To your knowledge, how are teachers experiencing learning experiences in their classrooms?

#### WHERE TO GO NEXT.....

- How might learning support be further developed in the secondary school?
- To what extent and in what ways, have your learning support experiences

[This schedule for the interview provides a guide for a line of questioning. Yet, the interview is driven by the responses given by the participant. By using the responses given to initiate and continue conversation, the above areas of interest are incorporated in a sensitive, appropriate manner.

# **Addendum G**

# SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING SUPPORT

## Individual Interview Guide

**Grand tour question:**

**Tell me about learning support in your classroom /**

**Vertel van leerondersteuning in jou klaskamer**

- How do you meet the support needs of learners in your class?/Hoe voldoen jy aan die leerders se ondersteunings behoeftes in die klaskamer?
  - What competencies are involved/ Watter vaardighede is betrokke?
- What do you see as your most important responsibility when doing learning support?/Wat beskou jy as die mees belangrike verantwoordelikheid tydens leerondersteuning?
- What is your understanding of diversity in your classroom/school?/ Wat is diversiteit in die klaskamer?
- In your experience, what is the importance of supporting learners in your class?/ In jou ervaring, wat is die belangrikheid van leerondersteuning in jou klaskamer?
- In your understanding, what are the biggest challenges supporting learners in the classroom?/ Wat is die grootste uitdagings om leerders te ondersteun in jou klas?

- What important message do you want to share with other teachers regarding Learning Support? / Watter belangrike boodskap wil jy graag deel met ander onderwysers rakende leerondersteuning?
- What advice do you want to give other teachers who deal with diversity in the classroom?/ Watter advies kan jy gee aan ander onderwysers oor diversiteit in hul klaskamers?
- What is your opinion concerning training and professional development for teachers in secondary schools regarding:/ Wat is jou opinie rakende onderwysers se opleiding en professionele ontwikkeling?
  - Learners social and emotional needs/ Leerders se sosiale en emosionele behoeftes
  - Learners with literacy, numeracy, reading difficulties/ Leerders met geletterdheids-, wiskunde en leesprobleme
  - Learners who display behaviour problems/ Leerders met gedragsprobleme
- What is your view regarding support for learners outside the classroom? / Wat is jou opinie rakende ondersteuning vir leerders buite die klaskamer?
- How could teachers benefit from resources and support from the community?/ Hoe kan onderwysers baatvind by hulpbronne en ondersteuning in die gemeenskap?
  - Do you think teachers need support, Yes/No? please explain. / Dink jy onderwysers het ondersteuning nodig? Ja / nee? Verduidelik asseblief.



# **Addendum H**

## SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING SUPPORT

### **'Mapping support in our classrooms' – Activity**

Make a drawing of a typical day in your classroom. (Please use the crayons provided)

# **Addendum I**

# SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

## OF LEARNING SUPPORT

### Individual Written Questionnaire

**Please answer the following questions**

1. How do you support learners with diverse support needs in your classroom? / Hoe voldoen jy aan die leerders se ondersteuningsbehoeftes in die klaskamer?

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2. In your experience, what is the importance for providing learning support in the classroom? / In jou ervaring, wat is die belangrikheid van leerondersteuning in jou klaskamer?

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3. What can be done to promote learning support in the classroom? / Wat is nodig om leerondersteuning in die klaskamer te bevorder?

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4. What advice will you give to other teachers' regarding support for learners in their classrooms? / Watter advies kan jy gee aan ander onderwysers oor diversiteit in hul klaskamers?

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5. What are the implications for teachers who support learners in their classrooms? / Wat is die implikasies vir onderwysers tydens ondersteuning van leerders in die klaskamer?

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6. What qualities do you perceive a teacher should have to support learners with diverse needs? / Watter kwaliteite het 'n onderwyser nodig om leerders met diverse behoeftes te ondersteun?

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7. What role does the teacher play in preventing development of learning problems? / Watter rol speel 'n onderwyser tydens voorkoming van leerprobleme?

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8. Please describe a typical learning support experience in your class / Beskryf asseblief 'n tipiese leerondersteuningservaring in die klaskamer

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9. In your experience what is the difference between learning support and remedial teaching? / Met jou ervaring, wat is die verskil tussen leerondersteuning en remediëring?

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**10.** In your experience how best can the teacher be supported by the school to support learners with learning difficulties in the class? / Met jou ervaring, hoe kan die skool hul onderwysers ondersteun sodat leerders die beste ondersteuning ontvang?

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## **Addendum J**



CODING	PORTION OF THE TRANSCRIPTION FROM THE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW- Mr B	COMMENTS
Learning support	<p>I– Good thank you sir let's ask you the first question, what do you do for the learners learning support needs in the classroom in other words what do you as person. Not necessarily your skills or strategies what do you do as person when there are children with learning support needs.</p> <p>P– What I have done is to that is with the grade 8s last year <b>I introduced the learning support classes</b> which was for the whole grade group, individual we look at things such as crossword puzzles <b>because you want you learners to read</b> which help the children to read which is also a way of doing it I helps the children with mind mapping</p>	Using abilities and skills
Learning support	<p>I – And what about the children in the class the one that just sits there and just doesn't know</p>	
Learning support	<p>P- <b>personal contact is also important</b> because sometime you are going to, especially with my subject which is Geography which is map work and calculation, <b>where you can go and sit with the child to personally sit</b>, or you can take children that understand the work then <b>you can use them and move them to sit with and then they don't feel intimidated</b></p>	Reflect on previous applications
Beliefs	<p>I- it makes sense, a lot of sense thank you, what skills are involved here with you as person regarding those things that you noted , as you said you place them next to each other, what skills do you as teacher need</p>	Personal experience
		Beliefs of

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Beliefs	<p><b>P- You must know your work, that is basically important, you must be adaptable that is a basic skill that you must have</b>, where there is 24, 25 to 30 children in the classroom where <b>they don't have the same way of working, one must try different aspects, bringing it into the classroom at different times it is for instance too much to fit such a variety of skills in one period</b>. So sometimes you just do it in one way. Copy from the board, there is no skill involved with that, so you make sure that all the children have the work, then the next time they come in again then you can apply a skill, then play a video for the children, then it reaches another group of learners. If you give them games then it reaches another group of learners, not all in one period and I started to work like that in a term and then use all the skills that I can apply to include all the learners</p> <p>I- In your experience what is the value of learning support in the classroom, why is it important for you there</p> <p><b>P- It is important for me there</b>, we can't let our learners, why learning supports important for me there, <b>our children don't have at home, they don't have computers at home</b> and not in my subject field, they do have computer technology but they don't have computers at home, textbooks they don't have at home basic reading materials are not at home, so we have to teach them that</p>	responsibility
Learning support		Skills awareness
Beliefs/ understanding		Use diverse learning support strategies
Learning support		Personal experiences
Challenges		Awareness of constraints in the systems

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Learning support Learning support Beliefs	learning can also go out there, <b>I told parents that if you could spend money on one newspaper (Burger) then you have reading material for 2 months you, so that is important to say to the children but also to the parents they must prepare themselves for what they can do at home and we must teach them what we can, without learning, what they don't have at home</b>	Lack of resources for adequate support  Caring  Insight regarding available resources
Challenges	I- It is wonderful to hear these things that you do because you are actually doing what is the best to do you are actually doing the right thing, Now according to you what are the biggest challenges to help the learners in the classroom	Responsibilities, conscientious/ hardworking
Learning support	P- <b>That, there is a too little time look, the syllabus is to loaded</b> , from the department we have to work through it, <b>for me it is if I can get a child to the point where he can understand, if he can take the key words out, if he can do that then then the content I can cut because he can continue with the skills and that is what he needs to do</b> , that is the most difficult things to do, because if we can give him that then he can use it at a later stage, so uhm, <b>time departmental expectations itself, workload</b> the fact that you would like to, <b>your primary task is the child in the class academically, but the whole child will develop culturally and sport is also a constraint that we have, the challenge is must I cancel the sport this afternoon because there are a few children that I want to make aware of their</b>	Learning support and recognition for interactive learning
Challenges		
Beliefs		
Challenges Beliefs		

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Challenges	<p>participation and then we must not forget the other <b>constraint is your community</b> which you also have to add that is also a constraint</p> <p>What important message you have which you would be able to share with other teachers regarding learning support</p> <p>P- (Laughing) Because that does not just happen, does it.</p> <p>P- <b>Yes teachers do not easily share, good or bad</b></p> <p>I-What would you want to share from your experience</p>	Lack of collaborative practices
Attitudes/beliefs	<p>P- I think a large sense of, not a sense I would like to share <b>humour, humour is an important</b> part of for children that come from different communities to include and I would like to share humour we all know that we must work hard, that is no that, but something that is something that takes time to get to the level of your median level child the bottom and the top ones to be reached, to keep the balance it is a fine line, but I think that is very important but <b>sometimes to realise that you work with the faster children in the class</b>, it is easier, and they enhance the standard of the class, and you have to make sure that you get the percentage so that the top learners of the class still gets stimulated</p>	Aware of diverse needs

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Beliefs	<p>I- interesting that you note humour, it is a very real human characteristic, depends a pot on the human do you think that is very important of the teacher to give of their characteristic</p> <p>R- Yes for me <b>it is very important that in every class there must be a joke to elicit that positive reaction then your day is also better</b></p>	Awareness of emotional needs
Challenges	<p>I- What is your opinion regarding training professional education and there we can discuss, social emotional needs, the learners, literacy and behaviour, what kind of help do you think teachers need to help children in the class, do you think they need that</p>	
Challenges	<p>P- <b>definitely we need that our workshops</b>, we have more, we need more workshops especially with a school with a setup like ours, you get thrown in and the milk has to thicken itself so that you can walk on it (laughing) and the department comes out and then the <b>biggest problem for me is the communication is limited</b> there is only communication at certain times we even in my ideal world shall I say there was more people that came to talk to teachers about their emotional world, emotional problems on a daily basis which are all over and it does not matter what school it is, those emotional problems have to be discussed, we are left to solve those problems ourselves maybe I would want the principal, maybe I will become a principal, working hard on that, I would</p>	

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Learning support	<p>like to <b>create a space where teachers them self can relax, maybe a palates class or and outing to Jan S Marais park</b>, but as a teachers exercise so that you can unwind because it is a <b>stressful environment in which we work, that is important I would also like to see interaction with our former</b> model C school and our school the idea is we must learn from them I don't really agree with the concept (laughing) so that there is more <b>interactive meeting and more exposure to extra mural activities, outdoor activities to increase our mindset</b> I am someone, that is why I started those classes last year, when they come from the primary school that there must be a <b>program on learning and study methods but it must be every year is must continue</b>, so that in grade 10 we have an idea, so that we have in grade ten about 50% of children that independent and the bridging phase is very important, that was a way of addressing the bridging phase. <b>Another thing that I would also focus on is the parents</b>, often I see parents a meeting an intervention meeting then we discuss schoolwork and then the parent says we don't understand the work, so my line of story will be if I had to study further, would be about <b>getting parents to be more involved with schoolwork specifically</b> on academic level, especially in our culture where children grow up with grandmas and uncles which are outside the upbringing system not inside the parent system we must actually do parent education where we must actually ask where is the work that you can't do so</p>	Lack of teacher support
Challenges		
Beliefs		Collaboration Systems interaction
Learning support		
Learning support		



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	<p>somebody in K is going to find it difficult to travel but he can help in K</p> <p>I-How can you use resources from the community, what kind of resources are there in the community that you can use at this stage</p> <p>For me there is few, <b>you must remember as an teacher you can work against or with the system</b>, against the system is to when I get someone in the class to work for me, now the department has such a learner help in the overseas country and that works 100% they have the facilities, <b>so if we can get people from out the community to facilitate us</b>, which I am 100% for I for example think about someone who can help you to mark, you must take them through the training process but you don't have to wait for the department to do that the school can initiate something, you understand we can ask for 10 young people who want to work in the school or one for each teacher we can tell them what you want initiate then they specifically look at these two learners, we can get more of them in , what skills do they have <b>in the community, sport level, cultural level those are the resources that we can get form outside</b>, We can get our people for supervision (laughing) but we can get them in we <b>have to be open minded</b> but there are people willing to do that. Sport we know can happen. Maybe a school like ours, <b>we tend not to ask there, that is our problem we are not willing to</b></p>	
Beliefs		
Learning support		
Learning support		
Beliefs		



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Beliefs	<p><b>go out there and ask, so then we are actually stuck with work that is not necessary, we must be able to delegate, we ask too little and we stagnate, and the last question is we work with the department we adapt</b> you don't have to do everything they say but work within the framework but as individual person you can't do that we have to as a school because if you do it as an individual you then work from out your pocket to get a thing done. I think we must get more people form outside our children's field is very small. Those that can is academic, the rest is sport there is few, because we don't have the environment for them to develop completely to reach the highest, we need the community for that and they can do that, but then afterward there is a program where children can be a better person and be empowered. You know every person has something that is important for him that is top of the list and if you can find out what is his top of the list then you create the opportunity for him and he goes in there then you can use that to coordinate his discipline, you cannot deal in this if you don't work on</p> <p>Are you interested in further studying, next year</p> <p>P- Yes I am</p>	<p>Collaborative interaction community</p> <p>Lack of collaboration</p>